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Prologue - the final blow

[image]

Raindrop struggled free, sending her attacker stumbling backwards into the bushes. Around her, cats were yowling their lungs out, crying out as if their lives depended on it. At this moment, they most certainly did.

The rogue was quick on his paws, already leaping toward Raindrop yet again. But he never reached. Instead, he was struck by lighting.

The cats were shocked into silence. Now Raindrop could see countless bodies sprawled on the ground, bathing in blood. Another lightning struck, and the RiverClan camp burst into fire. So did the surrounding land. The trees, the bushes, the grass, it all caught fire. *Cats* were on fire. Raindrop's mother and father, their already lifeless bodies, were lighting up in oranges and reds and yellows. Smoke was replacing the air, and soon the cats could not breathe. They coughed, and coughed, and coughed, but still they did not move. Eventually, some fell to the ground. They were all Clan cats. RiverClan, ThunderClan, ShadowClan, any other clan, it did not matter. They were Clan cats at heart, every single one of them. And now so many had lost their lives to *rogues.* Rogues who, miraculously, had gotten away. *They* had survived. *They* had won, in the end. All of this had been for nothing.

Then came the rain. It set out the fire, but it was too late. The trees were dead, the bushes bare, almost as if it was leaf-bare already. Except the stems were dark and ruined. They would not bloom when newleaf came around. Newleaf *was* around. But nothing would ever be the same now. Nothing would ever be okay again.

Raindrop stood still as the rain soaked her pelt. She did not know who had survived; she did not know if anyone even *had.*

She only knew that they had lost. They had lost everything. Their home, their land, their pride and honour, their clanmates, their loved ones. The rogues had taken it all. It was all so *unfair.*

She watched as the rain washed away the blood of her clanmates. She let it pour over her, let it wash away her grief, wash it away until all was left was a numb feeling in her chest.

As she stood, watching the grey sky, she thought, *it's all over now. We have lost, and nothing will ever be okay again. Not now, not ever; we have lost everything.*

Allegiances

Survivors:

The few who survived the battles against the rogues. Their clanmates fought just as well as them, but in the end, luck was what saved the ten cats. Now they live in fear; they have lost everything they know, and must now create a new life for themselves. Will they come together, or are they doomed to live as loners for the rest of their lives? And will they get the revenge they so desperately wish for?

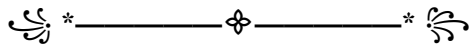
RiverClan:
Raindrop — short-furred blue-gray she-cat with lighter spots and warm amber eyes.
Ryespring — short-furred brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.
Drizzlestar — flecked white she-cat with cool blue eyes and a light brown muzzle and paws.

ThunderClan:
Wildfire — brown spotted she-cat with wild green eyes.
Ivywing — grey-brown tabby she-cat with darker marking and paws, blue eyes.

ShadowClan:
Sharpsight — black tabby tom with an unusually long tail and amber eyes.

WindClan:
Goldenthorn — golden tabby she-cat with a white muzzle and belly, light amber eyes.
Honeydusk — long-furred golden tabby she-cat with darker flecks and amber eyes.
Leafwillow — brown she-cat with a cream belly, paws and muzzle, blue eyes.

SkyClan:
Poppypaw — tiny dark-ginger tabby she-cat with deep green eyes and darker markings.



Rogues:

A group of semi-wild cats who have come together to form an allegiance. Only the strongest individuals are invited to join, making them one of the strongest groups in the twolegplace. But their territory in the twolegplace was not enough for them. Therefore, they set out to claim the land of the five clans. They showed no mercy as they took lives, so many lives, until there was none left; or so they thought.

Leader:
Ice — white tom with blue-gray legs and paws, icy blue eyes.

Leader's mate:
Cinder — gray she-cat with black tabby markings and golden yellow eyes.

Fighters:
Mouse — light gray tabby tom with lighter spots and tiny yellow eyes.
Leaf — brown she-cat with a cream belly and paws, light green eyes.
Sorrel — brown tabby she-cat with lighter flecks and hazel eyes.
Hazel — black tom with hazel eyes.
Ember — ginger tabby tom with light amber eyes.
Ash — light gray tabby she-cat with tiny yellow eyes.
Snow — white she-cat with warm amber eyes, unusually soft muzzle.
Dew — brown flecked tom with wide hazel eyes.
Twig — dark-brown tom with a lighter belly and muzzle, light green eyes.
Blossom — white she-cat with darker rosy flecks and green eyes.
Cherry — dark-ginger she-cat with tabby markings and hazel eyes.
Fog — light gray tom with darker paws and muzzle, blue eyes.

Queens:

Bird — dark gray she-cat with lighter flecks and blue eyes. (Expecting)
Crow — black she-cat with icy blue eyes. (Expecting)
Ebony — dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes. (Nursing)
Hail — blue-gray she-cat with lighter stripes and a white muzzle, blue eyes. (Nursing)

Chapter one - dissolving ashes

[image]

-*————————//————————*-

Rain was still pouring down the next day, but Raindrop barely sensed it, how her fur clung to her body, how her eyes felt constantly wet. Her only focus was on the grass beneath her. It dissolved into ashes as she moved her paws through it — small bits flying into the wet air, almost like birds taking off towards the sky — however gently she pressed down. It was beautiful, in a way. Sad, *so* sad, but beautiful nonetheless. Black tree stems stood everywhere, though no leaves were to be seen. They never would, now.

She continued on through the bare forest, tail drooping behind her.

Raindrop tensed. Someone was following her, watching her, she could tell. Her tail swished behind her. To her surprise, they, whoever they were, did not scare her; her heartbeat felt steady as ever. She guessed the past days of bloody battles and bloodier death had numbed her sense of fear. Perhaps that was a good thing.

Her tail swept over the dead grass. The dissolving ashes sticking to her wet fur was not a very pleasant feeling. Still, she did not draw her tail toward her. It was too much of a hassle. A stick broke behind her.

She hesitated before opening her mouth to call out. She had not spoken for a long time. She did not know if her voice was still usable, if it would still be hearable.

"Hello?" she called. "Who's there?" It felt weird, talking again. Her voice felt scratchy. She had grown used to quietly following Drizzlestar's orders, never voicing her thoughts, expecting everything to be fine in the end. She had expected them to win against the rogues. They had not.

When no cat answered, she called again, "...come out!"

Another stick cracked in two. Raindrop wondered if they were breaking sticks on purpose.

Then, suddenly, a cat leaped at her.

A gray tabby she-cat pushed her to the ground, claws sinking deep into Raindrop's fur. Raindrop let herself be held down, staring up at the rogue. The tabby returned her gaze. Her eyes were golden, searching.

She seemed confused as to why her opponent had already given up. Except Raindrop had not.

She pushed herself up just as the tabby she-cat aimed a blow at her belly, just dodging the attack. Baring her teeth, she moved forward, forcing her attacker back toward the river. But before she could leap, another cat appeared. He threw himself at the rogue, holding her down, clawing at her throat. He aimed multiple blows at her belly and muzzle, sinking his claws deep into her skin. She cried out, trying to roll away, break free from his grip, but he was stronger. He pushed down harder, paws covered in blood. Finally the rogue fell limp.

Raindrop stepped forward gingerly. The tom began walking toward her, similar in nature. Raindrop dared meet his gaze. He returned it steadily. She ran the last steps toward him. She was not the only one who had survived, after all.

"Raindrop," her brother meowed.

Raindrop buried her face in his fur, never wanting to be separated from him ever again. She had assumed he was dead, but he was not, and now she no longer knew what to assume of anything. Her sisters could be alive. Drizzlestar could be alive. So many could be alive.

She pushed her hope down. Hoping was no use; this much she knew. Hoping had gotten her and her clanmates nowhere when the rogues had first come to the lake. For now, she had her brother, and

that would just have to be enough.

"Alive," she mumbled into his soaked pelt. Her voice was clearer now. "You. Alive."

"Yes," he agreed. "I am alive. We both are."

To both cats surprise, the rogue's flank heaved suddenly. Heaved, then fell. She was not dead just yet. Blood oozed from the wounds on her belly and neck, only to be washed away by the heavy rain. It cleansed her wounds, offering comfort in its own way.

Cautiously, Raindrop moved forward. She bent over the rogue. Her brother stood behind her still, eyeing the unconscious she-cat.

To Raindrop's absolute astonishment, the gray tabby raised a paw and swiped it across her nose. It was more of a gentle touch than anything, but it sent Raindrop stumbling back into her brother's embrace. He wrapped his tail around her, quietly offering his comfort, just as the rain had done for the rogue.

Raindrop let herself lean on his flank, and they stood in comfortable silence, watching the rogue exhale for the last time.

Chapter 1.5 - reminders of the past

"Is she okay?"

Leafwillow gazed, worried, at Poppypaw's still body. Honeydusk rose to her paws, nodding slowly. She opened her mouth, meowing, "she's only asleep. I can't find any open wounds or injuries, either. I think she's caught a cold — I can smell it on her."

Leafwillow nodded along. She spoke, "understandably so, in this weather. Her body must not have been able to tackle the cold."

It was a long time since she had spoken so comfortably with Honeydusk. Though it was rather cruel, the sight of a SkyClan apprentice, laying, unconscious, on the bare ground, soaked in rain, had eased the tension between them when even the final blow had not. Leafwillow knew she would give her life for her sister, but it was difficult to maintain a good relationship between them in times like these. Even on her own, Leafwillow found it hard to control her mood. More than anything, she wanted to lie down and yowl to the stars that this was all just so *unfair*. She had decided, however, to stay strong, if only to convince her sister that she had hope that they would find a way out of this. And then, if their mom happened to be alive, too, she would show her that she could, in fact, keep her emotions contained.

"Do you think we should wake her?" asked Honeydusk, her voice soft, questioning. Leafwillow sat back down, then shrugged.

"You're the medicine cat."

"I know, actually." Honeydusk sounded both sarcastic and somewhat annoyed in her reply. "She needs sleep, but she also needs prey, herbs, and, most importantly, a drier place to rest."

"Don't we all," meowed Leafwillow, moving toward Poppypaw. She placed a paw onto her flank, gently as to not frighten the small she-cat. Poppypaw's body gave a sudden heave. She opened her eyes slowly, blinking away the water droplets landing on her face.

Honeydusk sat opposite them, her green eyes clouded. "It's okay," she mewed, in her usual honey-like voice, looking down at Poppypaw.

Poppypaw woke fully with a start. Her eyes widened, as if scared. Her pelt was ruffled. Honeydusk nodded to Leafwillow, then began stroking her soft tail along Poppypaw's spine.

Leafwillow drew her paw back toward her.

Poppypaw seemed to relax under Honeydusk's touch and presence — it was part of what made her such a great medicine cat, though Leafwillow would never tell her that. After a while, Poppypaw asked, "who are you?"

"Clan cats," meowed Leafwillow. Poppypaw purred, though it sounded forced. "Yes, I understood that much. Please—" her gaze moved to Honeydusk, or, as close as it could get, seeing as she was laying facing away from her, "let me get up. No need for massages."

Honeydusk quickly drew her tail toward her, looking embarrassed. Leafwillow stifled a purr of laughter. Poppypaw sat up, meeting Leafwillow's gaze. Her eyes were big and wondering, sad and misty.

"Sorry, I'm Leafwillow. This is Honeydusk, my sister. We're WindClan."

"Oh, wait, I recognize you now," mewed Poppypaw lightly. "You're deputy, and you're medicine c—" she broke off, coughing. Honeydusk watched, worry clouding her usually clear gaze, as Poppypaw fell to the ground yet again. "Water," she croaked.

Honeydusk hurried toward a particularly mossy stone in the twoleg garden they appeared to be in. The rain had already done a good job at soaking the moss, so Honeydusk returned quickly, carrying a piece in her mouth. She placed it in front of Poppypaw, who was

still coughing, though quietly. Leafwillow did not know what to do, so she did nothing at all. She stood and watched Poppypaw recover from her sudden coughing fit, with the occasional help of Honeydusk.

"Thank you," mewed Poppypaw then. "Sorry. I've always had them. The coughing. My medicine cat didn't think there was anything wrong with me, so she never tried to help me get rid of it. Maybe she should have..."

"Hm. I always got the impression that this would be the exact thing Almondwish *would* fret about... Anyway, are you okay now? Do you need anything else?" Honeydusk helped Poppypaw to her paws.

"No, I'm good, thank you," replied Poppypaw, sounding mildly embarrassed. Leafwillow thought their whole ordeal was kind of cute. Poppypaw reminded her so much of her own kit, Larksong. Larksong, who had left WindClan to live with her rogue mate. Oh, if only she had been with them now.

"Are you OK?" Honeydusk asked her, pressing up at her side. Leafwillow gave her pelt a shake, sending small water droplets flying off her, like flocks of birds escaping from their predators. Then she nodded.

"Yes, I'm good. We really need to find some food — come on."

And so they walked, together, further into the twolegplace.

Chapter two - familiar faces

Raindrop and Ryespring padded slowly through the bare forest. Their paws were black, covered in burnt grass and wet soil.

Ryespring veered to the side suddenly, seeming determined. Raindrop did not know where he was going, and could not share his certainty. Still she sulked after him, carefully avoiding any patches of grass in her way. She stopped as she realized where her brother was taking her. He stopped, too, a pleading look in his eyes. It was as if he knew that she knew, even though she herself did not know what she knew. She felt like she was loosing control over her own thoughts. She prayed to whatever was worth praying to that her voice, at least, would do as she commanded it.

"The twolegplace," she mewed simply. "Why?"

Ryespring attempted a careless shrug. It looked more like his shoulders were failing him, working in their own strange ways.

"Why are we going to the twolegplace," Raindrop repeated. She said it more like a statement than a question, which was not exactly what she had intended. It sounded as if she was judging him, accusing him, her own brother, her only surviving kin, as far as she knew. Making an effort to sound lighter, gentler, she meowed, "we're Clan cats. We don't go there."

"Well, we need food, and.. the twolegs have food, I think."

Raindrop had not thought of eating for a very long time. She thought she would rather just keep *not* thinking about eating. Perhaps that would keep her hunger down. She also realized that she was, right now, thinking about eating.

"You want to eat twoleg food?" she asked. Ryespring nodded helplessly, as if she had any reason to object. His paws prodded the

wet earth, like he had stood before Drizzlestar as he waited to receive his warrior name. Like rocks moved by powerful wind, only his paws were both the rocks *and* the wind, and the ground was a river, waiting, wanting to swallow them both.

When Ryespring said no more, clearly still looking for the right words, Raindrop mewed, "fine."

Her brother seemed surprised that she did not put up more of a fight. Why should she, though? She could see no reason as to why she would not want to go to the twolegplace. StarClan had already abandoned them. Breaking a few rules of their *precious* warrior code surely would not matter to her dead ancestors, not now. Probably not ever again.

Twoleg dens stood in every direction, rising up toward the sky. Maybe they all dreamed of being mountains.

Beside the huge squares, monsters stood sleeping, even though the sun was still high in the sky. It did not offer much warmth where it hid behind dark clouds. Rain *still* poured down, now more than ever. The sharp, stone ground of the twolegplace was cold underpaw, and the wet rain made it many times worse. Raindrop did not know exactly how many times worse.

Even in the twolegplace, the fire had left traces. The grass and wood was burnt around the edges, but that was that. The *twolegplace* was greener than Clan territory now. Still, Raindrop felt trapped, already longing for the familiar, yet new, feeling of RiverClan territory.

"Can you smell anything?" Ryespring asked. Raindrop drew in a breath.
"Rain, she meowed simply. "And twoleg."

"Where? Can you see it?" Her brother sounded quite panicked now, even though they were well hid under the shadows of some bushes. The fresh, green leaves made Raindrop feel even worse.

A tall twoleg female was, in fact, walking toward where they stood. Raindrop nodded toward her. Ryespring's eyes widened.

"Follow me," was all he said. He then set off running, away from the twoleg, away from the bush, through the pouring rain. Raindrop raced after him.

"Raindrop..!" came a faint call from somewhere behind her. No, she was imagining things. Her brain was playing tricks on her. Raindrop shook her head, then fastened her pace to keep up with her brother. She followed him through gardens and hedges, bushes and fences, stopping as they reached a sheltered spot behind a tall twoleg fence and even *more* bushes. Here, the fire was not evident at all. It was refreshing, seeing such fresh leaves again. It was overwhelming, too. Raindrop tore her gaze away, focusing instead on her own breathing and the soft grass beneath her paws.

Ryespring panted heavily beside her, flank heaving and falling, quick but steady. Raindrop's paws ached from the long run, already worn out.

After a moment of quiet, no cat moving, Ryespring bent over and licked Raindrop's head once, twice.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "We shouldn't have come here." At the same time, a voice called, "Raindrop!" yet again. It was clearer now, as if nearer. Raindrop glanced at Ryespring and, instead of acknowledging his useless apology, whispered, "can you hear that? My name."
Her brother nodded slowly. Raindrop was not imagining things, after all. Or maybe they both were. Still she moved, cautious, out of the bushes, into the rain.

A cat jumped down from the fence surrounding the garden they were in, and two more followed closely after. Raindrop thought, if there was ever an appropriate moment to feel relief at seeing cats from rival Clans, it was now. Honeydusk, Leafwillow and Poppypaw stood on the grassy ground before her, her own relief reflected in their eyes. Ryespring pushed himself out of the bushes, too, moving to stand beside Raindrop. She moved closer to him, almost instinctively.

Honeydusk, the beautiful she-cat who had been WindClan's medicine cat, stepped forward.

"Raindrop, Ryespring." She dipped her head. Poppypaw walked up to stand beside her, their pelts almost touching, as if the fact they were WindClan and SkyClan did not bother them at all. "I am *so* glad to see you!" Poppypaw exclaimed then. Raindrop realized she had been the one calling her name. Poppypaw, too, dipped her head, then let Honeydusk continue. Leafwillow lingered behind the two.

"As Poppypaw just said, we are all very glad that there are more of us alive."

Finally Leafwillow moved forward, appearing at her sister's side. Honeydusk whispered something in her ear, and Leafwillow meowed, "we've found food. Come on. The faster we get out of here, the better."

The question of *should they unite?* need not be asked. At least, Raindrop though so. Her brother seemed to think differently, surprising her as he asked, "and how do we know that we can trust you?"

Chapter three - decisions

Raindrop exclaimed, "Ryespring—", but Poppypaw interrupted.

"You don't have much of a choice," she mewed. "We have food, you need food." She paused, thinking for a while. Then she continued, "we may be from different Clans, but what good would it do us, say, if we poisoned you? Tricked you into eating crow-food? Do you really think we would do that?"

Her maturity surprised Raindrop. She wanted to apologize on behalf of her brother, but at the same time, knew she could not betray him just like that. She would stand by whatever he decided, whether he agreed or not. She would *not* be separated from him again, and she absolutely would *not* lose him, just as she had lost so many others. She had watched her parents die. She had seen them die in the paws of the rogues, unable to do *anything at all* to help them.

"Raindrop!" her mother had cried. "Help us, Raindrop! I'm sorry I've been a terrible mom, but surely you don't want me dead? Oh, Raindrop, save me!"

Meanwhile, her father had been.. harsher, in his wording. "Raindrop, you get down here right this minute! I raised you better than this! Come—"
He spoke no more. The rogue had killed him. He would never know the reason Raindrop had not saved him or his former mate, her mother. Truth was, they were surrounded by rogues that only Raindrop knew of. Rogues that only Raindrop could see. They had hid in the bushes, dens, anywhere out of sight, doing their best to make her parents' death absolute torture for her.

Raindrop had known they were there, and she had known that she would stand no chance had she tried to attack. They all ran when

the lighting struck. But her mother and father were already dead.

Honeydusk and Leafwillow watched Ryespring with curiosity. Poppypaw, who had previously seemed so confident, stood awkwardly by the twoleg fence. Ryespring stood close beside Raindrop still. So close that his pelt brushed hers, sharing the tiny warmth he had left with her, expecting nothing at all in return. He coughed, then, as if clearing his throat.

"That was well spoken," he muttered at last. Leafwillow took this as agreement, and, secretly, Raindrop felt immensely relieved it had come to this.

"Well, come on, then. You two might have all the time in the world, but I don't, and also, the food might be gone before we even get there if we don't hurry."

Raindrop instinctively nodded, as if Leafwillow was Drizzlestar addressing her Clan, giving orders, commanding her warriors.

Leafwillow turned around and gracefully jumped up, landing smoothly on the tall wood fence. Honeydusk and Poppypaw followed closely after. Raindrop let Ryespring go before her. When he had landed on the grass on the other side, she followed finally.

Leafwillow led them through the twolegplace cautiously, but seemed to know where she was headed. They ran from hedge to hedge, shadow to shadow, just as she and Ryespring had done when they ran from the tall twoleg. The rain poured down. The thunderpath beside them and the stone ground they walked on was slowly filling up with water. It felt as if Raindrop was wading through the shallow parts of the river by the RiverClan camp, her sisters close behind her, sunlight shining down on their soaked pelts.

They stopped once they reached a large area of gray stone, filled to the brim with various twoleg things. It smelt as though someone had died there. Raindrop did not see how there could possibly be anything edible in this sea of twoleg waste.

As soon as they had all caught their breath, Leafwillow stood up

and disappeared into the maze of thing-pyramids. She appeared again moments later, a small, pink square hanging from her jaws. Under the overwhelming twoleg scent it emitted, Raindrop thought she could scent something similar to forest prey. She preferred fish. Perhaps not too surprising.

Leafwillow dropped the pink thing at Raindrop's paws, nudging it toward her.

"There's more, but taste this first. I don't know how RiverClan cats work. Maybe you only tolerate fish."

Leafwillow said this somewhat sarcastically, though Ryespring seemed to miss her light tone.

"We eat what we *get*, unlike—"

"Ryespring," Raindrop meowed weakly. "Let it go." She felt as if she had just betrayed her earlier determination, of all things. Ryespring did not finish his sentence. His silence was comforting, in a way; he did not seem angry.

Raindrop caught Honeydusk glancing at her from where she sat beside Poppypaw. Then the medicine cat gazed down at the pink thing. "It's not so bad, if you ignore the twoleg smell," she meowed. Leafwillow grunted, sounding irritated, then disappeared yet again into the maze of twoleg things. Honeydusk, too, rose to her paws. She padded toward Raindrop and, as she reached, pushed the pink square toward her with her light golden paws.

"Please eat. It's the only source of food we have, for now, and I really don't want you to die of starvation." She paused, waiting.

Raindrop bent down and gingerly sniffed the twoleg food. Then she licked it. It tasted heavily of, well, twoleg, but underneath was a flavourful, meaty taste. She ripped off a piece and chewed it slowly, her gaze fixed on the ground beneath her.

"We need to stay together to survive," Honeydusk went on. "And that means we must all *live*. That much, I think, is obvious."

Raindrop finished about half of the twoleg food, then pushed the

rest toward her brother. He looked at her, gaze searching, and she nodded, as if telling him that, *yes, it tastes somewhat good and no, it's not poisoned, and no, it won't kill you to at least try it.*

Though her belly still growled, greedy now that it had tasted food, she let him finish it.

Chapter four - like a wildfire rippling through the forest

After a while, when Ryespring had finished his piece of the pink thing and Honeydusk had retreated to her position beside Poppypaw, Leafwillow returned. She carried a huge bird-like creature in her jaws, covered in white feathers. It had a weird red shape on its neck.

Leafwillow dropped the bird at Raindrop and Ryespring's paws. "Chicken," she mewed. "There's enough for everyone. And I promise, it's good. Poppypaw?"

Poppypaw came toward them. Leafwillow ripped of a big piece of the chicken — whatever it was — and pushed it forward, placing it in front of the apprentice.

"You deserve it," was all Leafwillow meowed.

Poppypaw eyes widened; she seemed surprised. "Thank you," she replied, sounding genuinely grateful. Together they finished the the twoleg bird, and Raindrop felt comfortably full. In fact, she had not felt this stuffed in many days, maybe even moons. Her belly ached slightly, though it seemed pleased.

The sun was going down faster than Raindrop had hoped. There were tall sticks standing by the twoleg dens, fences, and hedges, and along the thunderpath further into the twolegplace, that emitted a constant but weak light. It shone onto the ground underneath, forming circles of light following the many paths. Raindrop hoped they would not have to cross any thunderpaths on their way out, even if that meant taking a longer route.

Leafwillow led them from shadow to shadow, not unlike how they had entered. She took no risks. Only Poppypaw seemed relatively sure they had any idea where they were going. She strode just behind Leafwillow, her tail raised high. The fact they were from

different Clans seemed forgotten, even to Raindrop. She was glad Leafwillow had taken it upon herself to lead them out. She acted almost motherly, scolding but gentle in her commands. No wonder she had been deputy of WindClan. And her mother had been a noble leader once, too. Now, however, they did not know if she was still alive, if she had survived the final blow.

Raindrop had felt trapped in the twolegplace, but, admittedly, RiverClan territory did not feel much better. The trees were bare, the grass unpleasant, and the ground soaked. As soon as she jumped down from the fence separating the twoleg territory and her own, she felt someone was watching her. It was almost as if said someone had been waiting for them to emerge from the maze of twoleg dens, preparing to attack. Perhaps a rogue, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Honeydusk slowed her pace, falling in beside Raindrop. Ryespring padded close on her other flank, but moved away as the medicine cat approached. Raindrop wished he would come closer instead. She longed for his warmth, his quiet comfort, his endless sympathy and care.

"How are you?" Honeydusk asked. Her voice was soothing, a perfect mix of sweet, soft, and gentle, much unlike her own, hoarser voice.

How are you? Such a generic question. Raindrop was not very okay, or happy, or relaxed, or any of what you are supposed to feel in life. She though none of them were. She was numb, and that was that. She did not see the point of the question. Still, she meowed, "I'm managing."

Suddenly the group halted. It was a rough movement, rippling through the five cats like a wildfire rippling through the forest, almost causing them to stumble into each other.

Leafwillow pricked her ears, her body tense, tail drooping behind her. Poppypaw leaned in to whisper something in her ear.

"We have to get out of Clan territory," Leafwillow stated then. She continued, "Poppypaw suggests we cross the thunderpath border." Poppypaw flattened her ears at this, seeming awkward at the

mention of her name.

Honeydusk left Raindrop's side to walk up to her sister. Raindrop guessed she had disappointed her; just like her sisters were better to her mother, Leafwillow was better to Honeydusk.

Leafwillow stood still. Her brown pelt looked dull, soaked from the rain. Raindrop caught her gazing at her and Ryespring.

"This is RiverClan territory," she stated, as if they did not know. "And you are RiverClan. I think it's only natural that you two lead us from here."

The setting sun cast its light upon the tree stems and thorny bushes, outlining them in a dim but noticeable light. Though it was halfway hidden by clouds, it shone. Raindrop thought, if there was a thing that would always shine, it would be the sun. It hid sometimes, but underneath the covering layers, even at night, it shone. Even at the darkest of times, it shone, and something about it brought Raindrop a sudden burst of hope. She quickly pushed it down again; she had already established that hoping would do her no good.

Raindrop padded forward, through the dark grass, until she stood before Leafwillow, Honeydusk and Poppypaw. Ryespring followed. She met Honeydusk's gaze, and saw her own grief reflected in her amber eyes; they both remembered. Not the same memory, of course, but a memory nonetheless, and not a very happy one.

She turned around and began walking forward, toward the thunderpath. A low hissing sound came from the forest behind them. She ran toward the thunderpath. Ryespring, Poppypaw, Honeydusk and Leafwillow followed.

Chapter five - the other side

Raindrop did not stop until she reached a patch of grass just by the thunderpath. The grass straws were all thin and fragile, just like they were on every other part of RiverClan territory. Well, maybe except the land closest to the lake, but the days between the battles had been warm — far *too* warm — and rain was almost nonexistent; the lake had shrunk, and the RiverClan camp was completely drained from any water that had once surrounded it. Raindrop remembered now, more than ever, how the fire had swallowed the already battered camp, and how she herself had barely gotten away; had it not been for the rain that came after, she was sure she would have died. She now felt even worse, reliving the days of battles in her head.

The air felt heavy, and the acrid monster scent filled Raindrop's nostrils. She shook her head, as if to clear her thoughts, then pressed her paw down gingerly, feeling the hard ground of the thunderpath. No monsters were to be seen, though she had learned not to trust her sight alone when crossing. She looked around. Left, then right. The ground lay still underpaw, meaning that no monsters were near.

" ... Now!" she yelled. She made an effort to speak loudly and clearly, so unlike her usual mumbles and murmurs. She did this somewhat successfully. The five cats raced across the thunderpath, their paws barely touching the hard ground. For once, Raindrop was glad it was raining so heavily. The cold water soothed her pads, and the ground under her paws did not feel as warm or harsh as it would have done, had the weather been any better.

The land on the other side of the border was similar to the territory they had just left behind. The trees were bare, burned, and so was the grass, though there was a considerably smaller amount of it here. The straws were shorter, thinner. The flowers were practically nonexistent.

Raindrop had not been this far from the border since her early days

of apprenticeship. She missed those days a lot.

The cats stood, panting and puffing, hidden by uneven bumps and small hills in the ground. After a while, Leafwillow meowed, "I think we should look for a place to camp for the night. The sun is already close to going down." She looked up to the sky at this, squinting as she gazed upon the sun, halfway hidden by clouds. "Poppypaw, you come with me. Raindrop and Ryespring, you go together ... Honeydusk, you go with them, too."

Raindrop moved closer to her brother, and though it was raining, she felt a small tinge of warmth, pressing close to him. The sun shone down at him, outlining his ruffled shape in a mythical kind of glow. She drew in his scent, burying her face in his soaked pelt.

Leafwillow and Poppypaw padded off, further away from the Clan border. Honeydusk stood, paws prodding the wet earth, watching Raindrop and Ryespring with a hint of envy in her eyes. Raindrop wondered why Leafwillow had not chosen her, her own sister, to come with her. Instead she had left her with the two RiverClan siblings, who were clearly more reserved than the rest of the group. Her brother still seemed hesitant to trust cats of other Clans. Raindrop just felt watched. She had since they had left the twolegplace.

Honeydusk walked away, leaving Raindrop and Ryespring to themselves. Raindrop looked around. *Camp*, she thought. *Where can we possibly find shelter in this empty land?*

"Let's go," meowed Ryespring. But just as Raindrop stepped forward, Honeydusk called, "I think I found somewhere!"

Raindrop scrambled to her paws. Ryespring gave his pelt a shake. "Let's go," he meowed again, though his words held different meaning this time.

Their night was spent huddled together in some wet bushes, Leafwillow standing close to the rest, guarding. Raindrop had not yet been able to sleep, and had given up even trying at this point. There were too many things going on in her head. She lay next to Ryespring who, perhaps not so surprisingly, had his eyes opened,

too. She watched him for a while, then whispered, "we should guard."

"Yes," replied Ryespring. "Of course."

Leafwillow gazed at them as they rose to their paws, careful as to not wake Honeydusk or Poppypaw, though Raindrop was sure neither of them were really asleep. Leafwillow looked down as Raindrop and Ryespring came to sit beside her.

"Go sleep," Ryespring told her in a low voice. "You clearly need it." She bristled at this, angrily lashing her tail behind her, but moved to lay with the others.

"Good night," Raindrop managed. Leafwillow seemed to relax. "Thank you," she breathed.

Raindrop leaned closer to her brother. She drew in a breath, then stated, "I feel watched." Her mew was more of an exhale than anything, but Ryespring seemed to understand. His only response was a nod.

Chapter six - the watcher and his admirer

Raindrop was surprised to find she had, in fact, fallen asleep. She was even more surprised to see a muscular tom sitting some tail-lengths away, watching as the sun rose, painting the sky in pretty pinks, yellows and oranges. It shone very brightly today. He attempted to scramble away as he realized Raindrop had woken, but it was too late. His sudden movement seemed to have woken the rest of the group as well. Ryespring opened his eyes rather slowly, then pushes himself to his paws beside her, eyeing the stranger cautiously. Leafwillow padded over to stand beside Raindrop. Honeydusk rose, though remained at Poppypaw's side. The SkyClan apprentice slept on.

"Have you been watching us?" Raindrop pressed. She did not need an answer; the tom avoided her gaze, replying without words. His uncomfortable posture spoke for him.

What surprised her the most, however, was the sun that shone brightly down at them. The rain had stopped finally.

Leafwillow approached the stranger cautiously.

"Are you a Clan cat?" she asked. The stranger bristled. "Is that not obvious? I just stood guard for you because these two *warriors* couldn't stay awake for one night and I couldn't leave you unguarded, not with rogues free on our territory. Is that *rogue* behavior to you?"
He empathized the word *warriors* as he spoke of Raindrop and Ryespring. *Yes,* she though, *we fell asleep. There's no need for you to make it a bigger deal than it already is.*

"I never claimed you were a rogue," said Leafwillow, apologetic. "I was simply asking a question. I don't recall ever seeing you at gatherings, however, so I suppose that's why I would need to ask such a thing." There was nothing even remotely aggressive in her

voice. Still, the tom lashed his tail in anger, his fur standing on end.

"I've been there. My warrior name was announced last moon, too, so surely you picked up on *that?*"

Honeydusk's eyes widened slightly at this, as if she had realized something. She then shook her head, held out a paw, licked it, then drew it over her cream head. The sun shone down at her, lighting up her pelt. Raindrop though she looked kind of beautiful in the glow.

"I was at camp watching over my injured clanmates last moon. I missed the gathering. Goldenstar-" Leafwillow's fur bristled slightly at the mention of her leader's name, though why, Raindrop could not know, "-explained my disappearance, I'm sure."

"Well, okay, then. Why should I care, though? Actually, I think I will go. You lot clearly don't want me here. Good-bye."

"Go on, then. See how long you survive alone in a land full of rogues. I suspect you could fight them with your tongue if you wanted."

Raindrop stifled a purr of laughter. Though she tried her best to keep still, stay neutral, she had to admit Leafwillow made a good point. She had no interest in fighting, however, so she kept quiet.

But just as the tom turned to leave, Poppypaw rose suddenly to her paws. Honeydusk looked rather frightened.

"Sharpsight!" Poppypaw called. Raindrop thought her voice sounded kind of hoarse. "No, wait! Don't go!"

Sharpsight turned once again, his eyes widened, his black fur ruffled. "What?" Though he was still trying his best to sound dismissive, there was something new in his voice, something warm, something that sounded suspiciously much like relief.

Poppypaw left Honeydusk, hurrying toward Sharpsight. "If you go, you'll be killed," Raindrop heard her say. She thought she heard, "I've survived alone since the second blow... why shouldn't I, now?" but was not entirely sure she had got it correctly. Why would

Sharpsight have been surviving alone since the second blow? It made no sense.

Poppypaw leaned in to whisper something in Sharpsight's ear. Raindrop caught, "It's not the same now... no... but we need you... *I* need you..." It must have been quite the convincing speech, as Sharpsight announced, "I will stay with you, if you intend to let me." He then went on to glare at Leafwillow. Leafwillow dipped her head in return, already recovered from their earlier argument. "Of course," she mewed."We're stronger together."

Chapter 6.5 - sharp shadows of the past

"How'd you know Sharpsight?"asked Leafwillow, distractedly drawing her paw over her ear. She sat beside Poppypaw, rays of sunlight falling upon her brown coat. Ears pricked, she listened intently, seeming much more interested in Poppypaw's answer than grooming her own pelt.

"Er, well, he fished me out of the lake once, and then I kind of helped him out in a battle against the rogues." She paused, hesitating. Her dark-ginger pelt appeared to shine in the bright sunlight, reflecting the daylight beautifully. Her green eyes, however, were dark, and she seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden, as if unsure of something. She continued, "and.. er, there was the exile—"

Sharpsight, who, Honeydusk realized, had also been listening, let out a rather angry hiss. He sat some tail-lengths behind Leafwillow and Poppypaw, his black fur ruffled. His tail lashed behind him, swiping over the grass, which, as Honeydusk had seen so many times already, dissolved to small ashes. The sight no longer fascinated nor saddened her; she had seen it way too many times to care, really.

Poppypaw's ginger tail flickered, looking as if it was on fire. She said, rather awkwardly, "er, forget I said that. No, really, saving lives brings Clan cats together, rivalling Clan or no. It's... how we work." She looked frightened as she met Leafwillow's green, questioning eyes, who had now completely given up on smoothening her wild fur. This was much more important, it seemed.

"...Really. It's as simple as that." Poppypaw sounded both scared and hopeful as she spoke.

"That's... nice," concluded Leafwillow. Admittedly, Honeydusk was

surprised her sister had not been more... demanding, in a sense. She had accepted Poppypaw's reply without as much as a word of doubt of its truthfulness, and she had not even asked about 'the exile'. Honeydusk had never been much of a curious individual, at least not of things quite like this, but she could not stop herself recalling the last moons' gatherings. Surely Spotstar would have told the other Clans about something as important as an exile.

...

"I'll say it as it is, Goldenstar," said Drizzlestar, souding calm and controlled. Her eyes, however, were troubled, dark. "We're losing. There's no point denying it. Do you agree, Spotstar? Dewstar, Ripplestar?"

Ripplestar gave a brisk nod of his head, whilst Dewstar shrugged weakly, hopeless. Spotstar opened her mouth, as if wanting to say something, but closed it again as Goldenstar began, "we mustn't lose hope, not now, and not ever. Our warriors are more than capable of defeating a bunch of crow-food-eating rogues who follow no code of honour whatsoever."

"I hear you, and I see where you're coming from, Goldenstar, but I can't deny that the rogues know how to fight. They have killed more of our warriors that I am willing to admit, and I am hesitant to let more lives get lost in the paws of these 'cats'." Spotstar's eyes were but thin slits, showing no distinguishable emotion, and she added, "I would like to ask our medicine cats one question. Have StarClan sent you any signs? Any new prophecies? Have they communicated with you at all?"

The group of medicine cats shook their heads simultaneously. This was expected, though the cats gathered around them and the leaders let out small, disappointed sighs.

"Oh, and there's one more thing I would like to mention—"

...

Honeydusk swallowed a frustrated sigh as her memory broke off. It was her intent, of course, as she had gotten to the part where the rogues had attacked, before the fire broke out, but still. She felt it essential to know that Sharpsight was someone she and the group

could trust. Cats who were exiled were usually not very trustworthy; this she knew from experience.

Poppypaw, now wearing a guilty expression, frowning, stood up and walked over to Sharpsight. Leafwillow's gaze followed her until she and Sharpsight, who had now risen, too, moved too far away to even bother listening in on them. It was a mystery that was not for them to solve.

Honeydusk looked past her sister at Raindrop and Ryespring, who sat beneath a tall and sharp rock which rose toward the sky, speaking in low voices. Shadows fell upon them like a delicate pattern of markings, giving them a sort of mythical appearance. It contrasted perfectly with Raindrop's intricate spotted, blue-gray fur.

Raindrop's amber eyes locked with Honeydusk's, and they sat, looking at each other, for a long while. No words were shared between them; Honeydusk thought she could see more than enough just by returning the glance. Raindrop's eyes were warm, though clouded, as if attempting to keep a sea of emotions down. She felt a sort of connection between them, too. They were both just numb. Though for somewhat different reasons, she guessed.

She was handling this whole thing so well, or, she was managing, as Raindrop had said, because StarClan had told her it would happen.

Chapter seven - surfaced truths

"At least *I* take this whole thing *seriously*! You're just mooning over your perfectly fascinating RiverClan warrior-wannabe crush, not even bothering to remember your own *code*."

"Do *not* bring Raindrop into this. She is not what this is about and you *know* it, and she is as much a warrior as any of you. At least she manages to keep her cool as this happens."

Raindrop watched in awe. The heart in her chest felt as if it was close to breaking, though not from grief.

Leafwillow and Honeydusk stood, bathed in sunlight, pelts bristling. Leafwillow continued, "see, now you're defending her! You're desperate! Honeydusk, you're a medicine cat, for StarClan's sake!"

"And I don't think StarClan would care much now, would they? They haven't spoken to me in moons. They let us all fail. Leafwillow, I wouldn't dream of betraying the rules of the medicine code, and I'm not even *attracted* to her. She is not Palecloud."

Raindrop almost let jealously take over the numbness inside her. She did not know why or how it happened. Who even was this Palecloud? It was, however, not something she wanted to feel, so she pushed it down rather quickly.

"Ah, I see what this is about, then. You just want attention now that mom isn't here to *shower you* with it!"

"*I* didn't even *start* this fight! At least mom managed to keep her kits in her own Clan!"

Leafwillow gasped soundlessly. Honeydusk had crossed a line, that much was obvious. "I-I'm so sorry, I didn't mean that—" she stammered, but Leafwillow had already turned around, and was running off toward the burnt-down forest, further away from RiverClan territory. The shadows of the trees swallowed her whole,

and soon Raindrop could not see even the slightest glimpse of her bristling brown coat. Honeydusk sank to the ground, a look of great distress on her face.

Raindrop approached her gingerly.

Ryepspring, who, Raindrop realized, had also been watching, rose to his paws behind her. Contrasting Honeydusk, he looked more at ease than he had done all moon. Raindrop took this as a sign to continue forward.

Honeydusk did not seem aware that Raindrop was even there as she lay on the ground with her ears flattened. Her tail was wrapped around her, and her golden flank rose and fell unevenly under the bright light of the sun. Her eyes were half closed.

"Are you OK?" said Raindrop, remembering her earlier conversation with the now-sorrowful medicine cat. Honeydusk gazed up at her, and their eyes locked once more. Raindrop took in the intricate details of her face, her golden stripes and saddened orange eyes.

"...I'm managing, I think," meowed Honeydusk then. Raindrop purred weakly. Honeydusk did, too. She went on, "I just need time to collect myself and then I'll go and apologize. I'll be fine."

Unlike Raindrop, Honeydusk gave a proper answer to the question. It showed their differences quite perfectly.

Chapter eight - a healer's instinct

Miraculously, Leafwillow returned, only a short while after her and her sisters argument, a plump bird hanging from her jaws. Crimson blood was smeared across her mouth and muzzle; the sun highlighted the red liquid, making it look as if on fire. Breathing heavily, through a mouthful of feathers, Leafwillow mumbled, "put up... quite...the fight, this one." She dropped it somewhere near the middle of the gathered cats. "It's enough for everyone."

At this, Poppypaw began to cough, though Raindrop did not think the two things were connected in any way. She moved forward, almost instinctively, as if Poppypaw was a Clanmate in need of her aid. In a way, she was, now.

Honeydusk, however, was faster. She walked forward, seeming determined not to meet Leafewillow's gaze, stopping as she reached where Poppypaw lay. The apology, it seemed, would have to wait.

Honeydusk crouched down beside a coughing Poppypaw, whose face bore a pained expression. She began massaging Poppypaw's ginger flank, her paws moving slowly, rhythmically. Sharpsight looked as if he wanted to interfere, but he, too, knew that none could help his friend better than a medicine cat as skilled as Honeydusk. Still, he frowned as he gazed at them, squinting slightly at the warm but harsh sunlight that met his darkened orange eyes. Its light fell upon ground and cats alike, and their fur looked as if glowing under the open sky.

"Water," meowed Honeydusk then. "Someone — bring me water. Soak a piece of moss — quickly — then bring it here. Please."

Sharpsight, seizing the opportunity, rose to his paws, swifter and more determined than Raindrop had ever seen a ShadowClan warrior move. He hurried off, back toward where the twoleg bridge lay, separating RiverClan territory from the outside world. Or,

Raindrop saw, he headed for the river that ran below it. Raindrop felt rather useless as she watched him go.

Ryespring sat beside Raindrop, distractedly cleaning his claws, intently watching Poppypaw, whose coughing had gotten quieter and softer by the second. Honeydusk's strange massage seemed to be at least somewhat successful.

"She'll be fine," Raindrop mewed to her brother, though why, she did not know. Ryespring merely nodded.

The bird lay untouched before them.

...

"Will she be okay?" Raindrop heard Leafwillow ask Honeydusk, carefully, as if to not upset her further. Water seemed to have cured Poppypaw's cough, at least temporarily. She and Sharpsight had once again moved out of earshot.

"Yes, for now. She'll survive ... can we talk? Properly?"

Silently Raindrop applauded Honeydusk's courage.

Leafwillow's eyes widened slightly. She mewed, "oh ... of course, um, but let me get this first." She walked toward her catch. Rays of sunlight fell onto her brown pelt, and blood was no longer shining in her light chest fur. She gazed around, as if making sure she was not about to be attacked, rogue or predator alike, then tore off a piece of bird meat and moved back to her sister, carrying it from her powerful jaws. She spat out a couple of feathers in the process.

" I thought we'd share this. Like we used to," she meowed, sounding cautious still.

Honeydusk's eyes seemed to darken. She nodded weakly in response.

"I'm sorry," Honeydusk said then, her voice breaking. "I didn't mean what I said. Really. I'm very sorry. I couldn't be here — survive here — without you."

"I'm sorry too," Leafwillow replied, pushing the prey toward Honeydusk. "And I don't want you to starve yourself. Please, eat."

Honeydusk looked down, then up again, meeting her sister's gaze. "Oh ... thank you. I won't, I guess. Sorry."

And together they finished their piece of the bird, a sense of calm settling in the warm air and atmosphere that surrounded them.

...

"I don't want you to starve yourself, either. Come on," meowed Ryespring, nudging Raindrop to her paws. He padded toward the bird and, with a quick glance at Leafwillow, tore off a piece. Raindrop looked over at Poppypaw and Sharpsight. They were walking toward them, now, as if Leafwillow had called out, 'come eat!'. She had not, however, and was now giving her pelt a throughout wash, while Honeydusk watched her, quiet, seeming at ease for once.

Raindrop was amazed by how fast the sisters had forgiven each other. She was amazed they had even managed to talk their argument out at all; she remembered the times when she and Ryespring had fought. There had not been much apologizing, then, but it had not exactly been their fault alone, either. Stupid Sparkclaw just had to come and ruin everything. In a way, Raindrop was kind of glad she no longer lived. *What..? I can't think like that.* She gave her head a shake. *Pull yourself together,* she told herself.

"Are you coming?" Ryespring asked suddenly. He gazed at Raindrop, his dark eyes curious. She shook her head again. Then, rather abruptly, she nodded, mumbling, "of course. Yes."

Poppypaw and Sharpsight approached, too. Leafwillow gave a nod of her head, and so they, Raindrop and Ryespring finished the bird together. Raindrop felt comfortably full. She did not know nor care how Leafwillow had managed to catch such a huge bird.

Honeydusk met Raindrop's gaze. Her eyes shone warmly and, bathed in sunlight, Raindrop thought she was the prettiest she-cat she had ever seen.

Chapter nine - as if it was burning

Raindrop sat beside Honeydusk, their pelts brushing, watching the sun set before them. It was swallowed by the clear lake beneath, and, for a spilt second, the water surface appeared red and glowing.

Darkness fell finally. Stars filled the sky. They moved in circles, steadily approaching the two cats, as if urging them to reach out and touch them with their paws.

Honeydusk pressed closer still, radiating the calm energy Raindrop so desperately longed for. She leaned close to Raindrop's ear, breathing softly. She opened her mouth, but no words came. Longing rose inside Raindrop's chest, her heart aching. It was impossible, yet she wanted it more than she had ever wanted a thing in her life.

She whispered, "Honeydusk, I—"

...

Raindrop woke with a start. Nothing about what she had just dreamt made any sense whatsoever. Though the sun was shining down at her she felt cold to the bone. A tom sat beside her. He bent down and muttered, "we have visitors."

Visitors?

Raindrop got to her paws, looking around cautiously.

Are they rogues?

"Honeydusk, oh, my daughter, you're alive," rasped a voice. The voice of a cat whom Raindrop had, up until this point, believed

dead.
"You're alive," Goldenstar, leader of WindClan, went on. She was frantically licking Honeydusk's golden head, which, seen next to her own quite like this, was near identical. The one thing that set them apart were their eyes; Honeydusk's, warm and sweet, a shade of orange similar to that of honey, and Goldenthorn's, piercing and cold, though amber nonetheless.

"...Hi," said another voice. It was softer than Goldenstar's, though Raindrop thought it sounded strangely fake. Guilty, perhaps.

"Mom, please—" gasped Honeydusk, souding distressed and greatly relieved all at once.

Goldenstar continued moving her tongue repeatedly over her daughter's head, murmuring, "you're alive," under her breath. Looking at Honeydusk, their eyes meeting for a short second, Raindrop thought, *this is wrong.* Still, she could not help the warmth that spread inside of her as she gazed at the beautiful golden she-cat.

"Hi!" mewed Poppypaw brightly to the stranger. Raindrop tore her gaze away from Honeydusk and her almost identical mother.

Sharpsight added, considerably less brightly, "who are you?

"...Wildfire," Wildfire mewed, quietly.

"Were you named after the fire?" Ryespring asked. He had moved nearer the two newcomers, moving his tail as if urging Raindrop to follow. Without hesitation, she did. The sun on her back felt almost too warm as she neared. Her pelt felt as if it was burning.

"No," replied Wildfire. "I wasn't."

Leafwillow's gaze drifted from Wildfire to her mother and sister, then back again. Her expression remained the same: relieved but saddened, curious but cautious.

"Mom," mumbled Honeydusk again. A hushed silence fell over the group of cats, who were now eight in number. It was a depressing amount compared to the many who had once thrived by the lake.

"Goldenstar, please!" cried Honeydusk. She freed herself from her mothers grip, continuing, her voice shaking, "I get that you're glad to see me, but you've got another daughter, too!"

'You just want attention now that mom isn't here to shower you *with it!'*

"I no longer go by the name Goldenstar," said, well, the leader of WindClan. The mother of Honeydusk and Leafwillow. A grumpy she-cat.

"I believe StarClan has abandoned us, the Clans, and therefore I refuse to go by the name they have granted me together with my nine lives. I am Goldenthorn to you all."

Fair enough, Raindrop thought. She was not, however, much of a fan of the way of which Goldenthorn spoke, or her air of authority; she spoke as if demanding respect, which, as of now, she had not earned nor deserved. Raindrop was sure not every cat in the group would agree with these beliefs and viewpoints. And she had been faithful, once, even more so than the many hopeless warriors who had gathered in preparation for their third and last battle. The fact Raindrop had known the past-Goldenthorn was what made her trust the present.

Wildfire, however, she had never seen nor spoken to. The spotted brown she-cat kept quiet. She seemed unsure whether she was wanted where she stood. Guilty, even. Raindrop could not decide where these feelings had come from, but she felt the warrior was hiding something. Something that she hoped would never have to be revealed to the cats who now stood by her side.

Tension lay in the air, though it was rather unfitting in such a setting; the sun was shining down at them; a gentle breeze was ruffling their pelts, all of whom varied in color and shape; a third cat was approaching...

An excited meow broke the silence. It exclaimed, "finally I've found you!"

Chapter 9.5 - judgemental values

A third cat approached, emerging from the burnt trees and bushes that hid the thunderpath border.

"Ivywing," murmured Wildfire. Yes, of course, they were both of ThunderClan. They did seem quite reckless, after all, all so unaware of the consequences of their own actions. They just did. No thinking involved, no, none at all. The only thing they knew how to do well was fight, and that, too, was concerning in its own way.

"I followed your scent here!" Ivywing went on, her gaze drifting excitedly over the eight cats she was now facing. "Though I couldn't understand why there was rogue scent there, too—"

"Rogue scent?" asked Ryespring and Leafwillow at once. The whole group seemed suddenly alert; Ryespring wondered how a cat could possibly be this stupid. He felt his sister stiffen at his side, and knew that she, at least, would not have made such a terrible mistake.

"You've led them straight to us." Sharpsight glared at Wildfire and Goldenthorn. Ryespring thought he saw Poppypaw leaning in to whisper something in his ear. What, he could not hear. This greatly bothered him; as far as he knew, these two had been in a secret relationship of some sort ever since this exile Poppypaw had so briefly mentioned, which, in turn, was very much against the Warrior Code both had sworn to follow, and warriors who broke their own code simply could not be trusted.

"We can't just stand here," said Honeydusk, one of the few cats beside his own sister who Ryespring could tolerate. In her usual, honey-like voice, she continued, "there might not be too many of them here as of now, but I think we should leave before more of them come. We can't risk any battle wounds right now."

"I agree," Raindrop meowed. This surprised Ryespring; his sister,

usually so quiet, always keeping a neutral stand whenever arguments broke out — well, maybe except when Sparkclaw had been involved, but that had been between them and them alone — speaking up on such a matter before agreements had even been made. Thinking of Sparkclaw felt both wrong and was at the moment no cats' top priority, so Ryespring shook his head to clear his thoughts just as Goldenthorn mewed:

"We need to get away. If we go further that way—" she scanned the hilly landscapes surrounding them, her gaze landing on the direction that would lead them even further away from their own, known territory —"they'll give up on chasing us, surely."

"They could be listening right now—" Leafwillow began, but Goldenthorn had already turned and now ran in the opposite direction of where she had just looked. Ryespring thought it was a decent plan at best.

They all raced after her.

Chapter ten - tears of rain

Going this way felt wrong. Although Raindrop fully agreed with the theory of finding a new place to camp, and to get away from the rogues, she felt she was leaving something behind by actually doing it. They were running away from all they had ever known: the Clans, their territories, the meeting island, the Moonpool...

Running was becoming more and more difficult by the second; the wind was moving against them as if it's only intent was slowing them down, the grasses were dissolving under their paws, the warmth of the sun was close to unbearable...

Raindrop inhaled air in short gasps. She could not run, could not go on. Her whole body shook. This was all wrong. She was slowing down, though the others seemed not to notice; they were ahead of her; they were leaving her, leaving her to die—

In a moment of absolute desperation, in between shaky gasps, she cried, "Ryespring!"

"Raindrop," he replied, almost instinctively, skidding to a halt. He added to the rest, "stop!" It might have been the obvious hint of desperation in his voice, and it might have been purely because the group had somehow, suddenly gained the ability to trust each other; either way, miraculously, they all obeyed.

...

Two cats pressed against Raindrop's sides, steadying her, keeping her body from collapsing to the ground. She breathed in and out, in and out, her heartbeat steadying slowly. Strangely, the cats did not seem to emit any scent. As she stared at the ground, Raindrop thought their paws looked as if there were stars contained inside them.

"Go home," they whispered. Their voices had a distant clang to them, as if they were not really there. They felt light as air.

Raindrop drew in a breath. Then out. In, then out. The group had gathered around her. Honeydusk and Leafwillow were eyeing her closely, looking worried. Scared, even. Amazed. Sharpsight, Poppypaw, Wildfire and Ivywing were watching her intently. Goldenstar wore a deep frown. Ryespring seemed most scared of all.

"Go home," whispered the strange cats again. They looked as if they were fading away. Raindrop could see the ground just beneath their paws as if they were not there. Their voices, faces, shapes, filled her head and ears — then they were gone.

Are they StarClan?

"They said to go home," mewed Raindrop. She half-heartedly attempted to catch Honeydusk's gaze as she said this. She, of all cats, would understand. Honeydusk looked away, a serious expression on her face.

Where is home, anyway?

"Home?" echoed Ryespring. She met his gaze; his eyes were dark and clouded. "Our home? RiverClan camp?"

"Did you choke on your fur or something?" Ivywing's eyes were wide, curious.

"Did you have a vision?" Honeydusk asked. "Can you breathe?"

"Are you okay?" added Leafwillow.

Raindrop felt overwhelmed, yet strangely convinced of something. She meowed, "RiverClan camp." No more, no less. It got the point across quite perfectly.

"Let's go, then," said Poppypaw. "We'll have to be careful, but I'm sure we can do it." Sharpsight grunted disapprovingly beside her. He meowed, "if StarClan—" Goldenthorn bristled at the mention, "—actually spoke to us, why would they come to Raindrop and not Honeydusk? She's the medicine cat here."

Raindrop felt her heartbeat quickening yet again. It was crucial they got moving as soon as they possibly could; it was the will of the

Stars.

Honeydusk met Raindrop's gaze at last. She stared, unblinking, and said, "StarClan's messages are never very clear, are they? They were silent when we needed them most; now that they've spoken to us at last, we must listen—"

"Raindrop might've imagined it! StarClan has abandoned us!" Goldenthorn lashed her tail rather viciously. She continued, "I refuse to ... stroll ... rogues ..."

The rest of the sentence was practically non-existent to Raindrop. She thought she heard her brother say something along the lines of, "My sister ... wouldn't ... lie ..!" Her chest hurt. She was breathing in short gasps. Her legs shook, her tail lashed helplessly behind her, her claws dug deep into the ground beneath. She felt cold as ice, as if night had settled inside her, as if night's talons were clawing at her heart.

Ryespring pressed against her side. His scent was familiar, reassuring. Honeydusk appeared at her other flank. Her golden coat was showered in bright sunlight. She smelled of wind and warmth; how the two things could co-exist so harmoniously, Raindrop did not know.

"Breathe in," Honeydusk whispered, softly, soothingly. "Then out. Everything will be fine. In, then out."

Raindrop drew in a breath. It was more of a gasp than anything. Her heartbeat felt uneven, wrong. She wanted to sink into the ground.

"Is StarClan making her do that, too?" asked Ivywing. Her voice was loud, though not unkind. It was simply too loud. Raindrop felt Honeydusk tense up beside her.

"No, of course not," she insisted, somehow maintaining her sense of calm. She moved closer to Raindrop as she continued, "she's panicking."

In, out. In, out. In, out...

"Who did you see?" Honeydusk meowed then. Raindrop swallowed. She drew in a shaky breath. Her brother stood beside her, determinedly steady.

"It's okay," he whispered.

It was not okay. Why did it matter who had spoken to her? The group was wasting time. They had to get going *now*.

"Home," she said weakly. She made an effort to speak louder, clearer, and went on, "they told me to go home. My home. RiverClan camp."

She realized that she did, in fact, know who had come to her; only her little sisters had paws quite like the ones she had just seen.

"Come on, then," mewed Ryespring. "Let's go."

Chapter eleven - separated at last

"Remember to breathe," Honeydusk told Raindrop. She could not quite keep the purr out of her voice. Raindrop could not see what was so funny.

Honeydusk padded away to stand beside Leafwillow; Raindrop felt unreasonably bare and cold as their flanks separated. Honeydusk could not stay with her forever, Raindrop did not even know *why* she wanted her to, but it was her secret wish nonetheless. It was stupid; for all she knew, Honeydusk was glad to be rid of her. Calming her down just now had only been her natural instinct as a trained medicine cat. A fantastic one, at that.

This secret little wish of hers was not, however, top priority as of now. It would just have to go away. Raindrop gave her pelt a shake, rather roughly.

"Just follow me," Ryespring told the group, "and stay alert."

And so they did.

Raindrop was grateful her brother had taken it upon himself to lead them; she was not sure she could have managed it at the current moment. She was glad, even more so, that they were moving at last. Even if her desires would never be fulfilled, StarClans simply *had to*.

...

The RiverClan camp Raindrop had once known was paradise compared to what had become of it now. Bones of killed prey were scattered around and outside dens, looking as if the flesh had been torn off them rather viciously. Amongst them lay the many shells that had once lined the nests of RiverClan warriors and prisoners alike. The fresh-kill pile consisted of crow-food, feathers, bones, and... blood. The rogues had stayed here for a while, that much was

obvious. *And even if they hadn't*, Raindrop thought, *the fire would have caused big enough damage by itself.*

The sight made her heart ache, made her wish for the past, when things had been okay. She could not let herself feel these things, yet pushing them down was becoming harder and harder.

Worst of all were the rogues strolling around as if they owned the place. One thing was certain: the rogues were the literal definition of the word *foul.*

'Remember to breathe.'

She would.

...

"Now what do we do?" hissed Sharpsight, though, thankfully, he kept his voice down. Still, Leafwillow shushed him at once. The group was stood behind a rock that covered the lot of them, though barely.

"We can't just walk in, we don't even know what we're here for—" Ryespring broke off as Leafwillow once again hissed, "hush!" She then looked expectantly at Raindrop. Raindrop felt utterly useless; now that they were here, she had no clue what they were supposed to do. She stared down at the ground, unwilling to meet anyone's gaze but the earths. The earth always forgave.

"Oh, look — over there!" Poppypaw exclaimed under her breath. She waved her tail frantically toward the medicine den. "There's a cat in there!"

"Is it a Clan cat?" Ivywing asked abruptly. A rogue cast a suspicious glance in their direction. Sharpsight glared at Ivywing. Leafwillow only frowned.

The rogue turned around and carried on with what he had been doing: picking apart a piece of fresh that looked perfectly well and edible.

In the shadows of the medicine den lay a shape, seemingly asleep.

There was something disturbingly familiar about its flecked coat, those cool, blue eyes...

"Drizzlestar," whispered Raindrop and Ryespring simultaneously. Ryespring went on, "we have to get her out. It looks like they've captured her." He managed to keep his voice lower and quieter than Ivywing ever could.

"And how do we do that?" Sharpsight asked. Poppypaw added, "I'm sure there's some way."

Raindrop frowned. She half expected Ryespring to come up with a plan for them. He had always done so when they were little, when their mother was in a bad mood and refused to let them leave their nursery. Their father abandoning her for Springfall was their fault, clearly. Him taking Strawkit was too, of course.

She remembered sneaking out through the hole in the very back of the nursery den, the creeping through the camp, avoiding warriors and especially their distant father, then ending up in the medicine den with Shivertail and a curious yet frightened Reedkit. It was a rather rebellious act, seeing as their parents, and Reedkit's, did not allow them to even talk to each other. Sneaking out like it would have been gravely punished had Shivertail ever told on them.

How they had managed to go unnoticed for so long, however, was a memory buried deep in her memories. Her kithood was not something she liked thinking of. But...

"The back entrance!" she breathed. Ryespring met his gaze; his eyes widened in realization, as if he was thinking the same thing.

"Drizzlestar probably doesn't know of it." Her brother spoke in a low but clear whisper. "We won't all fit through; it might have been easy as kits, but we're larger now. Poppypaw is our best hope." Ryespring paused, and Raindrop thought she could guess why. This was sensitive information. Then he seemed to make up his mind.

"We'll show you the entrance," he fixed his gaze on Poppypaw's ginger shape, "and then you'll go in, get Drizzlestar, and help her back out through it."

"Then we sneak out of camp and run as if our lives depend on it. Out of borders, out of reach," Leafwillow added. Raindrop only hoped no rogues had listened in on their hushed conversation.

"...yes," agreed Ryespring. "Okay, Poppypaw, Raindrop, come with me." He took a deep breath.

"You wait here," he told the rest. "We'll be back."

Chapter 11.5 - it was a risk he beared taking

Poppypaw peered her head through the hole in the back of RiverClan's medicine den. Near-empty herb storage lined the stone walls. Though the sun was close to going down, some light was shining in through the actual entrance; she must not go too far in, or the rogues were sure to spot her.

"Drizzlestar?" she whispered, half her body still outside the den. The few hanging leaves that had not been burned brushed her pelt. They moved across her face, tickled her muzzle.

"You'll have to go in." Ryespring's voice sounded from behind her. It sounded weirdly strangled, as if giving this kind of information was paining him. Poppypaw gave her pelt a shake and stepped forward; there were small paw imprints in the ground, showing the traces of two tiny RiverClan rebels who she knew now as Raindrop and her brother. Weirdly, she longed to know the full story. Why were they spending time in the medicine den? Why were they sneaking in through the back? Why had their medicine cat let them? Maybe she could ask. But she must not distract herself with useless wondering, not now.

She attempted again, rising her voice slightly, "Drizzlestar!"

"I'm not telling you how to use our herbs! Know what, I'd rather *die* —" Drizzlestar growled as she stirred.

"Keep your voice down!" pleaded Poppypaw quickly. "I'm not a rogue, I promise."
The rogues want herb knowledge? She would have to think of that later, and she would most definitely tell Leafwillow as soon as they had gotten out of this place.

The leaves moved across her face again. A small part of her longed to lash out at them, just for the fun of it. Sharpsight would taunt her

forever if she did so.

"Come on, there's a back entrance, Raindrop and Ryespring are waiting there," she urged. Drizzlestar's eyes widened; she turned and met Poppypaw's gaze at last.

"Raindrop and Ryespring are alive?" she breathed.

"Yes," replied Poppypaw, relieved.

But why can't the rogues figure out herbs for themselves? They always seemed fine after our battles—

"Alright, then, just get me out of here," Drizzlestar meowed, relief and gratitude apparent in her deep voice. She added, "and thank you."

Poppypaw thought she liked this leader better than Goldenthorn.

"Come on, then," she said.

Releasing two chapters at once because this one is incredibly short, even for me.

Chapter twelve - achieved empty completion

Drizzlestar emerged through the hole at last. It looked as if it took her a great amount of effort doing so. Poppypaw came after, seeming relieved. Raindrop wished she could thank her, but knew she should not speak before they were a safe distance away from her camp. The rogues' camp. *No. Her camp.*

"You're alive!" exclaimed Drizzlestar as she laid eyes upon Raindrop and her brother.

They crept soundlessly back to where the others lay in hiding; Drizzlestar followed obediently, no questions asked. Even she realized they would have to wait.

Drizzlestar's gaze swept across Honeydusk, Leafwillow, Sharpsight, Wildfire and Ivywing; she met Goldenthorn's glance with fearless eyes, then dipped her head. Goldenthorn returned the gesture.

"Good to see you," mewed the golden she-cat.

Raindrop was unsure wether to interrupt or not. She was grateful that Ryespring did it for her; the others seemed afraid to speak. Perhaps they were afraid... Drizzlestar was a leader chosen by StarClan, after all.

"We'll talk once we're out of here." Her brother spoke in a harsh voice, but she knew he was glad to see his leader. He had to be.

Poppypaw gave a weak cough. Her eyes, once again, looked oddly glazed. *Is she really okay?*

"Keep your voices down, now," whispered Honeydusk. "Stay together and stay alert. We only fight if there is no other way out."

Ivywing moved slightly. She brushed against a large branch that

stood up just beside her. It appeared to loosen; it fell to the side, making a loud, unmistakable noise. To make matters worse, Ivywing's own scream of terror gave them away at once.

Wildfire pushed Ivywing to the ground, so that the rogues would not see her, but it was too late; at least ten rogues were heading straight toward their hiding spot. They were nearing. *We're doomed,* thought Raindrop. *They're going to end us all.*

"We need to go *now!*"

Leafwillow did not wait for any answers or agreements; she spun around on the spot and raced off. The others followed. Raindrop ran behind Ryespring, Honeydusk by her side and Sharpsight and Poppypaw behind her. Honeydusk was breathing rapidly. If Raindrop had the energy and voice to say, *'remember to breathe,'* she would have. She longed to cast another glance behind her. The others had to keep up.

The rogues were behind them, they were closing in on them, they would reach them, unless...

"Split!" bellowed Raindrop desperately. "Meet in bushes!"

But Drizzlestar would not know—

"We'll lead her," said two voices at once. Raindrop's ghostly little sisters headed toward their leader, their transparent coats glowing in the sunlight.

Honeydusk steered slightly to the left. Raindrop was relieved to see Wildfire, Ivywing, Poppypaw, Sharpsight and Goldenthorn pass her, all heading in different directions forward.

She followed Ryespring still; she would rather die together than let him go off alone.

They were nearing a tree. Ryespring cast Raindrop a quick glance. She thought she knew what he was thinking.

They moved so that they were running beside each other rather than in a line, heading straight forward still. If they crashed now,

they were dead.

The tree was growing bigger and bigger by the second. It's stem was thick, solid. It was sure to knock out any cat dumb enough to run into it.

"Now!"

They moved to each side, missing the tree by the mere length of a whisper. The rogues behind them had not; judging by the sound, they had all collided.

They had done it.

"Keep running!" Ryespring yelled. He could not quite keep the exhaustion out of his voice. Now that the adrenaline of running from the rogues and playing off such a plan was wearing off, Raindrop was starting to realize just how unbearably weary she felt. Her legs were aching of exhaustion, her eyes felt heavy, her chest pounding. She felt complete and empty at the same time. She knew with certainty that no other cats had survived. She did not know how, she just *knew*.

...

Raindrop collapsed as they reached the bushes. The others were already there. Ryespring lay beside her, breathing heavily, exhausted. As were they all. Their recently made nests, however, were ripped apart, and the branches of the bush they had slept under were broken and clawed at. The place had been destroyed with the only intention of, well, destroying it.

"The rogues I smelled did this," meowed Ivywing, panting, though she sounded sure for once. "I recognize the scents."

Chapter thirteen - a sense of belonging

"We need to find a new place to camp, but for tonight we'll stay here. Ivywing, could you guard?" Leafwillow's voice was hoarse from exhaustion.

Ivywing nodded, staring down at her brown paws. It was as if guilt radiated from her; she must be feeling terrible, there was no denying that her act had almost cost them their lives. But it could have happened to anyone.

Ryespring settled himself furthest away from Ivywing and Wildfire. Understandable, but unfair nonetheless. They just did not seem to fit in with the rest.

"I'll do it," Wildfire told Ivywing then. There was nothing pitying in her voice. She added, as if clarifying, "I'll guard. You can sleep."

"Thank you, Wildfire, really—"

"Sleep."

Ivywing was snoring shortly after. Raindrop disliked how quickly she had accepted her clanmate's help; Wildfire must be just as tired, if not more, but then again, she did not know the memories shared between the two.

Raindrop padded closer to her brother. His eyes were half-open; he looked as if he, too, was about to fall asleep, yet he managed to meow, "we were brilliant." His voice was muffled. He then closed his eyes fully.

Leafwillow and Honeydusk came and sat down beside her. Poppypaw and Sharpsight were huddled together some tail-lengths away, asleep. Poppypaw lay with her muzzle buried in Sharpsight's black fur. Moonlight danced upon his sleek coat. Undoubtedly, he

and Poppypaw loved each other very much. It almost made Raindrop feel envious.

Drizzlestar and Goldenthorn lay, again, some tail-lengths away in the other direction. They were both snoring softly, gently, as if relaxed for once.

Wildfire sat a fair length away from them all.

"What did you do?" asked Leafwillow then, curiously. Raindrop felt her eyes widen in surprise, but pulled herself together quickly, surprising herself yet again.

"Steered them into a tree," she meowed.

"I agree with Ryespring for once," said Leafwillow, amused. "That is actually brilliant."

"It is," Honeydusk agreed, purring. Raindrop purred back. Her legs and pads ached just a little bit less; even the hunger gnawing at her belly seemed to ease.

...

"...hi,"meowed Wildfire as Raindrop approached her. Wildfire sounded very tired.

"Hi," Raindrop said. Her voice felt dried up all of a sudden, as if a single greeting had been enough to exhaust her vocal cords.

"Can't sleep?" Wildfire asked, staring at the forest ahead of them.

Raindrop nodded slowly. *Why does she have to be so awkward all the time?*

The moon shone up in the sky, partly hidden behind large clouds. The air tasted of cold and the lingering scent of smoke, yet there was something else, something like fresh leaves and blooming flowers drifting from someplace not too far away. Honeydusk's sweet scent, too, lingered on her tongue, as if she could taste it still.

For once, Raindrop allowed herself to hope. She hoped that,

tomorrow, when they set out to find a better camp, they would find a place where plants still lived, where prey thrived, where *they* could thrive.

This made her think more optimistically of their journey forward. Even her distrust of the cat beside her seemed to disappear into thin air.

Wildfire, however, still did not meet Raindrop's eyes.

"I'm sorry," she breathed then.

At once, Raindrop replied, "what for?"

Wildfire looked down at the ground again; her claws were unsheathed, dug deep in the dry ground and ashes below.

"I don't know," she continued then. "For being here. For existing. You and your brother clearly don't trust me."

Oh. Had it really been that obvious?

"I'm sorry," Raindrop echoed weakly. Then, as if feeling defensive all of a sudden, "but Ryespring trusts no one."

"I know. I've seen how he watches Ivywing. He thinks she doesn't notice, but I can tell she's terrified of him, she's never even daring to make eye contact. She just wants to be accepted, you know. You and Ryespring and Sharpsight and whatnot aren't doing a great job at it."

Again, Raindrop whispered, "I'm sorry."

Why was she apologizing, now? Her new-found optimism was gone in a matter of seconds.

Wildfire went on, "I don't care how you treat me, or think of me, or whatever, as long as you leave her alone." At last she cast Raindrop a single glance of plain dislike. Then she moved further away from the all, leaving Raindrop alone but for her now racing thoughts.

She wished she was speaking to Honeydusk and Leafwillow instead.

It seemed her dislike had backfired, and the consequences were those of despair and desperate guilt. Leafwillow might think of her as a warrior-wannabe, but at least she did not make her feel this terrible.

"I'm sorry," repeated Raindrop miserably, as if Wildfire could hear her from where she stood. She felt the sudden urge to lay down and let the ground bury her beneath its many layers. Let the grass embrace her, let the earth claim her body and let her sisters from StarClan claim her soul so that she never had to wake again.

A wave of exhaustion and hopelessness washed over her. She lay down, focusing, yet again, to keep her breathing rhythmical and even. She yawned, her eyes closing slowly...

Miraculously, sleep claimed her; she dreamed of honey and longing. It was almost as if she could feel the sweetness of it on her tongue.

Chapter 13.5 - acts and insights

"You shredded their camp?"

Ice spoke calmly like he always did, his eyes narrowed as he watched the two cats standing before him. Snow's head hung low, paws shuffling the ground beneath her. She did not dare meet her leader's eyes.

"You followed their exact trail, ruined their camp, and then left without waiting to see where they'd go next? Isn't that the *job* of a spy? To observe the Survivors' every action, *and* remain hidden, undetectable? *Untraceable?*"

Snow, if possible, seemed to shrink even smaller beneath her coat, as if hoping the ground would swallow her whole. Her eyes flicked from one cat to the next, pleading. *Please help me*, her gaze said. *Please.*

Dew's heart sunk low in his chest as his eyes locked with hers. *Sorry,* he thought. If things were different, and if speaking up for the white she-cat wasn't a direct threat to his position as a Third, he might have. If death was not the inevitable result of doing so, he might have.

Fog, however, held his chin high, meowing, "We thought it was necessary to let them know that we're aware of their existence. So, yes, we did those things. I don't understand how that is wrong."

If Fog was scared, he showed no signs of it.

Reckless tom, Dew thought with a shudder. He shook his head. *I always knew you'd do something like this. Going against Ice is an admirable act, to say the least, but don't you realize the consequences?*

"And whose idea was this?" asked Ice, a slight thrill to his voice.

When the two spies kept quiet, he mewed, "my apologies. I meant

to say, *tell me whose idea it was.* Now."

Snow sunk to the ground, letting out a soft wail of despair.

"Please, it- it was Fog, he- he told me... he said—"

Fog bared his teeth in anger, growling under his breath. Before he could speak, Ice asked, his voice souding softer than the moment before, "what, my dear Snow, did he tell you? What could possibly have led you to do this? I *promise,* I won't punish you, if you *promise* to tell me the truth. Go on, now."

Snow's reply came out as a miserable sob, and she stammered, "he told me that he'd- that he would tell you I'm..."

"That you're what, exactly?" Ice's eyes were fully open at last, gleaming with interest. Hatred burned within Dew; Ice acted as if he cared, cared for his cats, but he was eager to punish them all at the slightest mention of disloyalty. Clearly, he could not care less whether they thrived or suffered. All he wanted was to control them.

"...*Disloyal*!" Snow buried her face in her paws, her ears flattened. Fog could only stand, gaping, his whole body shaking in anticipation. Dew watched helplessly; he kept his posture stern and his ears drawn back, only to keep up his feared image. There were times he regretted all that he had done to reach his position within the group. He was undoubtedly what the Clans would call a fox-heart.

Ice leaped from the tree trunk he stood on and moved toward Snow. Fog stood, shoulder fur bristling, a snarl on his face, beside her. His gaze was quite panicked. Now he, too, refused to meet his leader's eyes.

Ice nudged Snow to her paws, surprisingly gentle for a cat his size.

"And *are* you disloyal?"

Snow gasped. "No! I- I've never even considered going against you, ever!" Her voice shook, but she spoke clearly, confidently. At last she looked up, her eyes — shining with certainty — meeting Ice's.

He mewed, not unkindly, "of course you aren't. I've never doubted you for a heartbeat." His tail stroked Snow's back.

"You, however..." He turned to Fog.

"But they killed Cinder!" Fog's fur bristled, enlightened in the bright sunlight. "They killed your mate! They *deserve* to have their camp destroyed! They deserve to die, *every - single - one* of them!"

"*I* am the leader," Ice meowed coldly. "*I* make the rules. *And*, according to *my* rules, liars like yourself deserve the gravest punishment of all: *death.* Snow, please, could you end him for me? I don't want his traitorous blood on my paws." He sounded almost bored.

Dew was not even surprised. He hated that it had come to this, yet he had seen it happen countless times before. It was almost as if, now that most of the Clans were gone, Ice didn't care that he was killing his own cats one by one.

"But- but I-"

"If Fog tries to fight back he'll have *me* to deal with."

Snow stared down at the ground. "But I get so nervous when you're all- all watching me," she mewed softly. "I'm sorry."

What are you playing at? Dew watched with mingled curiosity and dread.

Ice touched his nose to Snow's cheek, then spun around and padded up to his tree trunk. "Then we won't look. Cats, I want you all off the island. Dew, you can stay." His mew was edged with poorly disguised impatience. He sat looking out at the poisoned lake, his tail lashing.

The others all moved toward the tree-bridge, crossing one by one. As soon as they reached the other side, they raced off, letting the forest conceal them in its shadows.

"I *hate* you!" Fog blurted out.

Ice sat quite still. "Okay. Snow, please. Dew'll make sure you survive."

Dew narrowed his eyes so that his vision blurred slightly. "We don't have all day," he hissed, regretfully. Ice *had* to believe he was on his side. It was the only way.

Snow leaped at Fog, a flurry of white overtaking a greater shape of grey. For a while, they rolled over each other on the grassy ground, both seeming hesitant to unsheathe their claws. *They still care for each other, deep down,* Dew realized.

With a furious hiss the grey shape threw itself at the white, flashes of red contrasting their light, ruffled appearances.

Dread prickled beneath Dew's pelt. He opened his eyes, unwillingly sliding his claws out. Ice still was not looking. Perhaps... perhaps, this once, he could do what he knew was right. For Wildfire. For Snow. For *all* the rogues.

Rogues. Another Clan word.

Dew threw himself between the two, shoving snow away with his hind legs and pushing Fog to the ground. Turning to Snow, he breathed, as quietly as he could, "knock him out. Don't kill."

Fog's yowling and struggles were sure to drown out all other noise. Ice would not — and could not — hear.

"I wasn't planning to," Snow whispered back.

Chapter fourteen - showered in sunlight

As soon as she woke the next day, belly screaming in hunger, Raindrop padded over to her brother, Honeydusk and Leafwillow. Ryespring's amber eyes were wide open; he lay watching the others, his ears pricked, as if listening for danger.

Honeydusk stirred as Raindrop sat down beside her and Ryespring. She let out a soft yawn, stretched, and quietly meowed, "Raindrop." Short yet full of warmth.

Raindrop cast a quick glance at Wildfire. She looked as if about to pass out, in desperate need of prey and sleep. Honeydusk, however, looked beautiful as ever.

"Yes," Raindrop said, moving her gaze back toward the golden she-cat.

Honeydusk gave her paw a lick and moved it over her ears. "I want to look for herbs before we leave. Come with me."

She waited, patiently, for her answer. Raindrop stifled a purr. A pleasant warmth spread through her, threatening to replace her lingering guilt from the night before. She thought she might let it, just this once.

"Okay," she mewed then. Weirdly, she felt as if this was a bigger thing than just looking for herbs.

Ryespring watched them both, a look of mingled curiosity and suspicion on his face.

Honeydusk bent over Leafwillow and prodded her with her paw, claws sheathed. She murmured, "Leafwillow."

"...what?" groaned Leafwillow, still half-asleep. Her brown fur

looked ruffled as she rose to her paws.

"I'm going to search for herbs. When the others wake, try to find something to eat."
Raindrop watched Ryespring as he eyed Leafwillow, his gaze now admiring.
"Of course," mumbled Leafwillow through a yawn.

...

"Get some rest," Honeydusk told Wildfire as they passed her. She was refusing to meet Raindrop's gaze, and seemed, once again, as if guilty of something. That something, Raindrop decided, was none of her business, and so she added, "Leafwillow will find food. Just sleep."

"...thanks," Wildfire meowed. Her eyes were thin slits as she got to her paws, and she wore a deep frown as she padded away from them, but beneath it all, she looked relieved.

...

Raindrop felt at ease as she walked beside Honeydusk toward the burned-down forest. She was exhausted, her pads were sore and cut, and her stomach ached painfully in hunger. Yet she was alive, she knew she would be able to eat eventually, and she had hope that they could find a place to settle for good, far away from the rogues and their cruel past. Hoping was not all bad.

Secretly, she also hoped that Honeydusk liked her in the way that Raindrop liked her. At the moment, as sunlight showered over them both, bathing them in pleasant warmth, even this did not seem all that impossible.

Light filtered in trough the many branches overhead, the shadows becoming steadily more complicated and intricately detailed as the forest grew denser still.

They walked in silence, their paces matching the calm atmosphere that surrounded them.

They moved closer, so that the tips of their tails touched.

Their pelts brushed.

They were moving side-by-side. Their pawsteps synchronized, soundlessly touching the ground as they walked onwards.

"Tansy." Honeydusk steered to the side. Raindrop followed, opening her mouth. A weak but sweet scent filled her nostrils. Honeydusk sniffed the remains of a cluster of tansy flowers, frowning. She moved her tail through the stalks, barely reaching. They dissolved at her touch, bits falling to the ground like the first snows of leaf-bare.

A few stems remained standing, yellow blooms contrasting their withered and burned surroundings.

"These will do for now."

"They're for coughs. Are they for Poppypaw?" Raindrop spoke before she could stop herself. It was such a stupid question — *of course* they were for Poppypaw. It seemed just the thing Honeydusk would do for any cat.

Honeydusk nodded, expression unreadable. "How do you know?"

Raindrop hesitated. This felt like exposing a part of herself that, up until now, she has strived to keep hidden. Quietly, she meowed, "...I, or, me and Ryespring, were in the medicine den a lot. Our medicine cat taught us some things."

"Really?"

Raindrop could tell Honeydusk longed to ask more. An invisible *why?* hung in the air.

"My mom was really strict. She blamed us for something that happened between her and my dad. She wouldn't let us out of the nursery very often because she was scared we'd talk to some other kits and she needed someone to yell at. Whenever she was outside or napping we'd sneak out of the den and into Shivertail's through a hole we found in the back. He was one of the few cats who didn't look down on us because of what my dad did. Then, when I got injured after a battle against ShadowClan, I started talking to

Reedheart, Shivertail's apprentice, who I hadn't been allowed to speak to before. She also taught me some things. She kind of because my friend. And then she died in the first blow. Shivertail died in the third."

Raindrop spoke as if she had not spoken for moons. Words tumbled out of her, leaving her mouth before she even had time to process what she was saying. Yet she felt like something heavy had been lifted in her chest. She felt lighter than she had in moons. Seasons, even. She had told someone at last.

She felt Honeydusk press against her flank. Honeydusk mewed, unable to suppress the note of longing in her voice, "maybe you had a thing for medicine cats."

Raindrop felt a purr rise in her throat. She breathed, "I still do." She was not sure Honeydusk had even heard her. Maybe that was for the best.

Honeydusk left her side and weaved through the grass and bracken in front of them. Then, reaching the surviving flowers, she bent down and bit them off by the stems. Three leaves fell down to the ground as she came back toward Raindrop. They swirled as they fell, carried down by a gentle yet tugging breeze. One landed smoothly; the other two were taken by the wind. It carried the scent of plants in bloom and thriving prey. Raindrop's mouth watered. If only the waters were clean so she could fish. Even better, she could teach Honeydusk how to do so.

"Should I carry some?" she asked. Honeydusk shook her head, gazing to her side, in through more bare trees and bushes. She spoke through the herbs in her jaws, "I hear voices. Let's go this way."

And so they did.

A/N: Leaves

Chapter 14.5 - shared experiences

"Drizzlestar." Leafwillow dipped her head as she addressed RiverClan's leader. "If you don't mind, I want you to take Sharpsight and... Goldenthorn, to hunt. I'll go with Ryespring." The fur on her shoulders rose as she eyed her mother.

Poppypaw stood up in an instant, opening her mouth as if to speak, but Drizzlestar mewed first, "of course."

Poppypaw glared at Leafwillow, momentarily furious. "I'm not gonna sit here all day while you work to feed our group. I'm coming with you."

"Okay, then, Drizzlestar, take Goldenthorn, Sharpsight and Poppypaw. Search wherever you deem likely to house surviving prey. Ivywing and Wildfire, you wait here. If the rogues come back, don't fight. We can't risk injuries."

Poppypaw's expression darkened, and she frowned as she met Leafwillow's gaze. "Can't I come with you?"

Leafwillow hesitated, then shook her head. Poppypaw's tail drooped. Then she pulled herself together and spun around to follow Drizzlestar away from the ruins of their camp.

I'm sorry, Leafwillow thought desperately, *but I need to speak to Ryespring. Alone.*

"Come on," she called to Ryespring. He padded toward her, his brown pelt gleaming. His amber eyes narrowed in suspicion as he glared at her, yet he held his chin high, approaching quickly.

Ivywing and Wildfire sat together, watching the others leave through eyes thin as slits. Leafwillow did not know what to feel toward the two of them.

...

"I don't think your sister is a warrior-wannabe, just so you know. I only said it because I was angry at Honeydusk."

Leafwillow willed him to understand. Ryespring had not exactly told her he blamed her for it, but it was just as obvious unsaid. When he was not glowering at Ivywing or scowling at Goldenthorn, he frowned at her. Always the frown. No words, no scowls, but an untrusting expression nonetheless.

Ryespring said nothing. He walked a few steps ahead of her, trodding carefully, tasting the air for living prey. Leafwillow doubted they would find any by doing so.

"Please. If we're gonna live together, we have to be on speaking terms, at the very least." *At the very least.* Leafwillow winced as she stepped over a rotten twig. There were no twigs on the moor, no branches hidden in the heather and tussocks. She could run freely there.

"Raindrop means more to me than anything else," meowed Ryespring at last. He seemed hesitant.

Leafwillow murmured, careful to keep her tone light, however much it affected her, "I know. I feel the same about Honeydusk. She's my kin, even when we fight, even when we seem like we hate each other. I'd give my life for her."

She could not tell whether she was getting to him or not; his expression remained unreadable as ever. She went on:

"Especially when you grow up with parents who don't really love you. Mom loved Honeydusk, but never even spoke to me unless she had to."

"She still made you her deputy."

"Honeydusk told her she got a sign from StarClan. I don't think she did, she just wanted mom to talk to me. I guess ... she felt guilty."

Leafwillow struggled to keep the fur on her shoulders lay flat.

Ryespring drew in a sharp breath.

"...Littlepond loved our little sisters more than us. My father left her for another she-cat right after she kitted us. He took one of our littermates with him and forbade us of speaking to him or his kits. She had our sisters with another tom."

When he said no more, Leafwillow meowed, unwillingly, "I don't even know who my father is. I was told his name was Aspenglow, and that he was a traveler and, according to my mom, better than I could ever be. They said he'd come back for us. He never did."

'Your father never would've let his kits leave his Clan! You're a disappointment, Leafwillow, a failure! I failed you!"

Ryespring stared at the ground. They had stopped walking.

"I'm sorry," Ryespring meowed. His claws were dug deep into the earth.

Leafwillow gazed at him once more. There was something beautiful about the way his pelt shone, how his cream belly blended in with his brown coat so effortlessly.

"But, we're here to hunt, not reveal our deepest darkest secrets."

"You're very right," Leafwillow said. In another life, she could imagine them hunting, side-by-side, their kits trailing not far behind them. She thought of Larksong and Rosefall. Ryespring would have been a better father to them than Heatherfur ever could. He was horrible to their daughters. Oh, how had she been so blind? Why had she ever trusted him to father anyone, let alone her kits? He was a battle-thirsty, cruel tom, that's what he was.

They walked on in silence, hopelessly tasting the air for traces of prey.

"Wait," mewed Ryespring then. "I smell something."

He took a sharp turn to his left, and Leafwillow could do nothing but race after him. What lay at the end of their path took her by surprise, as if a heavy stone had sunk down low inside of her,

crushing what remained of her fragile heart.

"Oh. Poor creature," she whispered. A dead fawn lay before her and Ryespring, half of its belly ripped open, fresh blood still oozing from its cut. It looked as if whatever had killed it had done its best at making its death a torturous one. Leafwillow let out a soft sigh.

Ryespring pressed against her flank. She cast him a surprised glance, and for the first time, he returned it. He said, unflinching, "it's in a better place now."

"You think we can eat it?" Leafwillow asked. She let her nose get buried in his soft fur, breathing in his scent. Ryespring eyed the creature, his amber eyes cautious.

"It'll feed the whole group," he meowed. Then, "but your sister should answer that. She'll know."

"She will," Leafwillow murmured into his pelt. "I know she will."

Chapter fifteen - a new beginning

[image]

"Is it safe to eat?" Drizzlestar asked, sniffing the fawn gingerly. Honeydusk stood beside her, head bent down. She meowed, "I think so."

"Then, thank you, StarClan, for this prey." Leafwillow took a small bite. She chewed, then said, "it tastes fine."

Raindrop and Ryespring approached the dead creature together. Raindrop thought he seemed distracted, as if far away, lost in thoughts. The tip of his tail twitched as he sat down.

Sharpsight and Poppypaw sat, tails intertwined, watching the others. Poppypaw appeared to be whispering something; she was leaning toward his ear. She looked happy and excited, contrasting his cool, piercing eyes and alert posture.

Ivywing and Wildfire sniffed the bird; Wildfire with suspicion, Ivywing with poorly masked relief.

Raindrop stifled a sigh of relief as she bit into the meat. Her belly felt as if it were singing with glee, it's aching easing at last.

It did not take long before the cats of the group felt comfortably full.

...

"We found this fawn, but we won't be as lucky next time. Prey here is scarce. We need to go further away from our territories to find a better place to camp." Leafwillow spoke slowly for once, as if willing everyone to grasp the importance of her words.

"Good to see we have a real leader among us," Goldenthorn growled

under her breath. She looked up, surprised, as Poppypaw burst out, "if you have a better suggestion, spit it out!"

Raindrop guessed she had not intended for anyone to hear.

Ryespring was glaring at Goldenthorn, fury in his eyes. *Since when did you care for Leafwillow?* Raindrop twitched her ears, watching intently.

"You gave away your position as a leader when you disclaimed the name StarClan had given you. You're not a true leader without faith in your ancestors. Leafwillow has been with our group the longest, so *of course* we'd rather listen to her. And as Poppypaw said, I doubt you have a better plan yourself." Sharpsight scowled at Goldenthorn.

Honeydusk kneaded the ground where she stood, frowning, looking rather awkward. Wildfire and Ivywing kept quiet, and Raindrop was not exactly surprised. Most likely, she guessed, they did not feel like they had the rights to say anything at all. With a stab of pity Raindrop realized that was most likely the others' fault — including her own.

"Let's get going then." Leafwillow sounded irritated rather than offended or hurt. "We don't have all day."

This reminded Raindrop of the day they had first met Leafwillow, Honeydusk and Poppypaw in the twolegplace.

'You might have all the time in world, but I don't, and also, the food might be gone before we get there if we don't hurry,' she had said.

...

Raindrop gasped in amazement as they reached land that showed the proper colours of newleaf. Land where bushes grew and flowers bloomed, land where trees carried foliage and birds fluttered between their branches. She closed her eyes briefly as leaves embraced them all, relishing the feel of soft grass under her paws. The delightful scents of nature filled her nostrils.

The cats had been walking for quite a while already; it was nearing

sundown, and for the first time in many days, small drops of rain fell from the sky. *And that's a good thing,* Raindrop thought. *It'll wash away our scent trails.*

For a while they padded through sweet-smelling heather and occasional spots of denser woodland, jumping over fallen stems and thorny brambles as they went.

Another while later, forest swallowed them in its shadows.

Suddenly Ivywing steered to the side, exclaiming, "look, over there!" She raced toward what looked like a great hump of rocks, or perhaps a very small cave. Raindrop followed, glad Ivywing could feel like she was contributing to the group's survival at last.

Ivywing led the way down the bushy hill, toward the rocks.

As they neared, Raindrop started to see the place in detail: it was, in fact, a small cave. A large flat rock lay resting on the risen ground opposed to it, forming a triangularly-shaped and very big den. Inside, more rocks lay on one side, making it look as if it had two levels. There were small cracks underneath the higher stone, of which Raindrop thought would make a good herb storage for Honeydusk. A holly bush covered the other side of the entrance.

It looked like a very potential camp.

"This is great!" Poppypaw purred happily. "The land isn't burnt, we've found a perfect place to build a camp, *and* we're far away from the rogues!"

"We could build our nests up there," Ryespring suggested, pointing his tail toward the raised level. He padded forward, then leaped up to the heap of stones. They remained steady under his weight. "It seems safe."

"And this is a good place to store herbs," Honeydusk meowed. "It'll be shielded even when the wind is blowing directly toward us, because of this stone here covering it." She pressed the tansy she and Raindrop had gather earlier into one of the cracks in the stone wall.

As they continued exploring the new camp and surrounding territory, Poppypaw's endless optimism seemed to spread to the whole group, even Goldenthorn.

Raindrop felt positively light-hearted as she sat beside her brother on the Levelled Stone. Honeydusk was working down below them, pushing herbs into the cracks in the wall. She kept glancing up at Raindrop, and Raindrop kept glancing back. Ryespring's body felt warm and soft at her side.

Raindrop took a deep breath and thought, *I can imagine living here. I really can.*

Drizzlestar leaped up to stand beside Raindrop and Ryespring.

"Every cat who wishes to listen, please gather beneath the Levelled Stone. There's something I'd like to do."

In an instant Goldenthorn, Sharpsight and Poppypaw, Leafwillow, Wildfire and Ivywing appeared beneath them. Raindrop wondered whether she should jump down to sit with them or stay at her leader's side, but Drizzlestar spoke before she could decide:

"Poppypaw, step forward, please."

A/N: This is the place I used as reference for the camp. Imagine it less sharp, maybe, and I think it'd work. I impulsively took the picture while skiing (Without skis — I hate skiing) with my family because I thought, *'wow, that could work as a Warrior Cats camp',* which is how I think about most parts of nature nowadays. It's quite fun, actually. Reading Warrior Cats has only increased my fascination for nature.

Chapter 15.5 - hopeful optimism

Poppypaw gazed up at Drizzlestar, excitement surging through her from nose to tail-tip. She blinked once, then twice, feeling Sharpsight's warm body against her flank. He pressed his nose to her cheek and mewed, "you deserve this more than any other cat."

"Thank you," Poppypaw breathed. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

Drizzlestar's eyes shone. She began, "Poppypaw, you've been part of this... this group we've made, longer than most of us here. You've proven yourself a true and worthy warrior time and time again. It's way past time you receive your full warrior name."

As Poppypaw waited, paws tingling with anticipation, she thought of SkyClan, and of all othe cats that were not here to watch her ceremony: her mentor, Sagefall, who had died in the first blow, and her second mentor, Patchtail, who, cowardly, ran away just before the third. All her kin, who had always been there, and now plainly were not and never would be again. Her closest friends and worst enemies alike. Everything that the rogues had taken from her.

But she had Sharpsight and all these new cats. She had this group. They were survivors. And soon, she would have her very own warrior name; at last she would be an equal to the others.

Drizzlestar said, "Poppypaw, you haven't finished your apprenticeship and warrior training—"

Poppypaw could not stop herself. "I have, actually," she meowed. Her ears were hot with embarrassment. "Two moons ago. I failed my warrior assessment." She looked down. "Sorry for interrupting."

"No need to be sorry. And, well, it doesn't change the fact I can tell you're more than ready. Poppypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and hunt, defend, and care for this group — *our group*

— even at the cost of your life? For StarClan's sake, don't die, but my point still stands."

For once Goldenthorn stood still at the mention of StarClan.

Poppypaw drew in a shaky breath. She looked up again. There was only warmth in Drizzlestar's glowing, blue eyes.

This was what she had been waiting for, desperately wanting, for moons. Her heart felt as if it was close to bursting from happiness.

She took a deep breath.

"I do."

"Then, by the power of StarClan and their unflinching guidance over us, I give you your warrior name. Poppypaw, for your endless optimism and hope, I name you Poppyglow. There's a fire of hope burning inside of you, a fire we should all strive to keep alive."

Drizzlestar leaped from the Levelled Rock. Gently, she rested her muzzle on Poppyglow's head. Poppyglow, in her state of euphoria, had to remind herself to lick her shoulder in return. She knew the ceremony by heart, as she had watched all her denmates and friends go through with theirs, but after failing her final assessment... she had given up hope that she would ever become a full warrior. And now she was. It was almost too good to be true.

Drizzlestar took a few steps backward, then purred, "Poppyglow!"

Poppyglow felt Sharpsight's tail brush her back. He joined in, "Poppyglow!"

From the Levelled Rock, Raindrop and Ryespring, simultaneously, called, "Poppyglow!"

"Poppyglow! Poppyglow!" the group cheered. Goldenthorn did not sound grumpy, for once.

It felt kind of as if they were a real Clan again. Kind of. And Poppyglow relished this feeling with all her heart.

Chapter sixteen - visions of horror

Raindrop curled in her newly made nest with a full belly and an even fuller heart. She snuggled closer to Ryespring, feeling his warmth spread through her, all inside of her. For once she felt certain that things would work out for them. Gently, she wrapped her tail around her. The moss nest was unfamiliar yet comfortable. She could barely feel the stone underneath. Taking a deep, satisfied breath, she closed her eyes, thinking of her sisters in StarClan and thanking them for leading her and the group to this place. Sleep embraced her like a mother wrapping herself around her kits, whom she loved deeply, unconditionally, with all of her heart.

...

Rainkit blinked her eyes open, her mouth forming a gasp as the world showed itself to her. There were colours and lights and shadows and textures, overwhelming flashes of movement. Holding her breath, she gazed around, taking in the place her mother called the nursery. Walls everywhere. Pelts everywhere. It felt almost claustrophobic.

Ryekit lay sleeping in the nest beside her, and finally Rainkit could see him. His body looked small and fragile. His fur was brown, mainly, with flecks of cream spread across his coat, belly and tail. His paws were an even lighter shade of cream.

Strawkit's pelt was a calm, dusky golden color, glowing in the daylight.

The chaos of color was making her feel dizzy.

Mother, Rainkit thought. *Where are you?*

As if she had been called on, a cat appeared, walking in through a strange, bright hole in the wall. Light shone through it. Was it the

sun?

The cat was her mother. She knew. The scent of milk and flowery herb was unmistakeable.

Instinctively Rainkit closed her eyes, purring as her mother bent down to lick her head. Familiar darkness surrounded her once more; the dizziness evaporated.

A sound came from somewhere in the nursery. "Littlepond!" it mewed. The rest of its sentence was a blurry mass of words, of which Rainkit only understood half of:

"Rainkit opened her eyes. We'll have to wait to find out if she takes yours or her father's. It's quite early. Poor Ryekit'll probably have to wait a while longer before he gets to see the den. Strawkit's might be soon."

"Yes, of course, yes," meowed her mother hastily. "But he'll get better. Shivertail promised." She sounded excited. Pleasant, flowery herb drifted off her.

'Yours or her father's.'

Was a father like a mother, but a tomcat, like Ryekit? Did *she* have a father?

"Rainkit?" Littlepond asked gently.

Rainkit opened her eyes again. Lights and colors blurred her vision, though she felt she was starting to adjust to their brightness. Curiously she looked up.

A face. Her mother's face, with a brilliant hazel gaze and an expression of the deepest love and affection for her kit.

Time passed around them, yet they stayed quite still, unblinking. At one point Strawkit disappeared from where she lay beside Ryekit. Briefly Rainkit wondered, w*here did you go?*

Slowly, however, the gaze changed. It's love became terror, affection vanishing into thin air. Rainkit grasped the full concept of

words just as Littlepond exclaimed, "that kit is *not* my daughter!"

The face darkened until there was nothing but darkness and two hazel eyes looking down at her, gleaming with hatred.

No, no, that isn't my mother!

A suffocating darkness settled around kit and mother, taking with it every trace of life around them, every pelt, every cat, everything within its limitless reach. It drowned out all sound except the beating of Rainkit's own, little heart, so that an eerie stillness surrounded her.

Rainkit took a step backwards. Blood roared in her ears. Ryekit was gone. The nursery was gone. This could not be happening.

"You are not *my kit!"*

The voice echoed in the empty void.

Rainkit was drowning under its gaze, unable to breathe, unable to blink, unable to look away. Why had she ever wished to see the world? Why had she opened her eyes? *Why?*

With a tiny crack, her heart broke in two.

Rainkit stumbled backward. She had to get away from it.

Away, away, away—

A pelt brushed against hers. Her brother's scent washed over her, surrounding her, filling the void, lightening the darkness, mending the beating force in her chest. A light at the end of the tunnel.

Blank drops of rain began to fall from the nothingness above them. Soon the hard ground became shallow water, lapping at the kits' paws, threatening to swallow them both whole.

Rainkit took another step backwards, Ryekit at her side.

Rainpaw took the next, Drizzlestar at her side.

Raindrop took the last, no cat at her side. Alone, like she always had been.

Water lapped at her feet, hungrily, greedily. Still the gaze was fixed on her. The water was soaking her chest fur, getting dangerously high. Her heart ached.

Where is everyone?

The gaze disappeared.

Darkness.

A flash of light.

Raindrop could see again.

Cats were standing on the other side of the river. Their gazes were empty, dull. One by one they were pushed into the water. Raindrop's feet were glued to the earth.

Sparkclaw appeared and fastened her teeth in Ryespring's scruff. Taking him away for ever and ever.

There was Reedheart, struggling against the current. The water consumed him.

Drizzlestar's head disappeared under the water. She barely struggled before the river ended her.

Shivertail was swept away by the current.

Her little sisters had never even learned how to swim.

Raindrop's throat dried up. Her mind was spinning. This couldn't be happening. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She was fine—

Then Honeydusk was there, paws flailing, paddling toward Raindrop with determined eyes. An invisible force dragged her under. Her yowl of horror was drowned along with her as she embraced the river's depths, never to live again, never to hear Raindrop apologizing from deep within her heart.

Raindrop's body was paralyzed, still, unmoving. She stood wide-eyed, gasping for breath. All the cats she loved. The river had taken them all from her.

Littlepond was the only cat left standing, the void still oozing off of her as if coming from within.

Raindrop whispered miserably, hopelessly, "no."

...

"Raindrop."

Raindrop blinked her eyes open. She was back in her nest at the Levelled Rock. Ryespring was snoring beside her.

An overwhelming wave of relief washed over her; it had been a dream. Just a dream. Ryespring was with her, not Sparkclaw, and Honeydusk was alive, meowing, "are you okay?"

Raindrop rose in her nest. Honeydusk sat before her, moonlight dancing on her golden coat.

"Yes," Raindrop breathed. Her legs shook from exhaustion, as if the river had actually tried to claim her just now. But it hadn't. It was all a dream. It had to be.

Her heart, previously so light, felt heavy as a rock inside her. Shivertail was gone. Reedheart was gone, her sisters were gone. All taken by rogues, not the river, for some *stupid* piece of land that was lost in the fire anyway.

A shiver ran through her, chilling her from ears to tail-tip.

"The rogues." Raindrop's tail lashed. "They have to go. Or we'll die too. Like Reedheart and Shivertail and— and—"

Her voice broke.

Honeydusk pressed against her flank.

"I miss them too," she murmured. "But we have each other. And one

day, we'll reunite with them, when we, too, join the ranks of StarClan."

Raindrop let herself lean against Honeydusk, the scent of wind and warmth and herbs and sweet heather filling her nostrils.

Stars shone brightly in the sky. Looking up, Honeydusk whispered:

"They're watching over us. With their help and guidance, we'll find a way to drive out the rogues. I promise. We'll survive. We'll live."

Raindrop took a deep breath.

"...Thank you."

Chapter seventeen - unwelcome

Raindrop watched as a single drop of rain landed on the ground before her. With it came a light downpour, barely making a sound as it touched the grass below. It was refreshing after the many sunrises of warmth and bright, blinding light.

Padding through the forest, alone, she was reminded of the day after the third blow. Heart heavy, feeling hopeless, defeated. The only differences were the rich trees, covered in fresh newleaf foliage, and that she really was not alone. She had the group. They had each other. And their passed ancestors were watching over them once more.

The trees parted, revealing a flower-filled clearing that smelled strongly of some sort of herb. Grass, ferns and bushes covered the earth. A river ran through its middle, sand and rock laying on both sides. A fallen tree made a bridge similar to the one connecting the meeting island to the territories by the lake.

The day before, she might have wanted to wade into the stream, to swim again at last. Now she imagined it would try to drown her. A RiverClan cat scared of the river. Pathetic.

Raindrop halted. A deathberry bush grew to her left, leaves rustling in the wind. Its red berries shone maliciously. She stared, torn between fear and intrigue.

Ideas wormed inside her mind, swirled around, conquered her every thought.

The death-inducing berries seemed to stare back at her, as if encouraging her, urging her forward. She imagined forcing one down a rogue's throat. Inducing their death.

"Raindrop," Ryespring meowed from behind her. He pressed up at her side. His scent drifted over her, filled her nostrils, calmed her once again. He eyed the berries with caution.

"Don't," was all he said. His silence spoke the words his mouth wouldn't utter: *don't even think about eating that. You can't leave me again.*

Raindrop met his gaze. His eyes were worried, pleading.

"You left me," she muttered. Sparkclaw's face appeared in her mind. "I never left you."

"I'm sorry."

"But I want to make the rogues leave."

Ryespring's eyes lightened slightly, as though in relief. He stated, "you want to poison them. Not you."

"Yes." Raindrop nodded. "We can put deathberries in their prey."

"We don't know if they have a fresh-kill pile."

"We'll find out."

Ryespring sighed. He muttered, "the rest of the group has to agree first."

"Okay." Raindrop felt sure they would.

...

"It's too risky," Honeydusk concluded. "There must be another way."

Raindrop blinked. *You promised.*

"I've seen how the rogues live," Drizzlestar chimed in. "They hunt only for themselves and their closest kin. There is no fresh-kill pile, no prey to poison. I'm sorry, Raindrop."

Raindrop stared at the ground. Finally she chooses to speak up, share her own thoughts at last, and everyone objects to her plan. Even Honeydusk. Even Ryespring.

"But didn't you mention they wanted herb knowledge?" Poppyglow gazed at Drizzlestar with questioning green eyes. Her fur clung to

her sides, water dripping off her. The rain made soft drumming sounds as it landed on the cave roof above them. Painfully quiet for a force so immensely powerful at times.

Eyes thoughtful, Drizzlestar nodded. She rose to her paws, looking down at Raindrop from the Levelled Rock. Her white fur clung to her body like blood sticking to an unwashed wound. Daylight filtered in through the rain-heavy clouds in the sky, enlightening a small pile of fresh-kill. Raindrop had not brought back any prey. She could have hunted. She could have fished. Instead she had hurried to share an idea the group did not even approve of.

"They do," Drizzlestar mewed at last. "We could find a way to trick them into eating the berries instead. We couldn't kill them all, but without their leader and deputy... well, they seem to be the reason they're all so hostile toward us. Some of the others even seemed sorry to be keeping me hostage."

"They have a deputy?" Wildfire asked suddenly. She looked down. "...It seems too Clan-like."

"More like the second-most feared cat among them. He had these terrible hazel eyes."

Wildfire shifted her paws, avoiding Drizzlestar's gaze.

"But, as of now, the rogues haven't bothered us, so I don't see what good poisoning their leader would do us. Other than to get revenge, of course, but we are Clan cats. We're better than rogues; we forgive and move on, we don't hold grudges."

Raindrop clawed at the ground. Not even her leader supported her. Not Honeydusk, not Ryespring, not Drizzlestar, no one. She was destined to be alone. Everyone left her. Her feelings and ideas and desires were unimportant here. Only survival mattered. Numbness settled inside her heart once again.

"Raindrop, please." Ryespring pressed up at her side. She moved away from him. *I'm alone*, she thought. *It has to be that way.*

Honeydusk gazed at her, eyed saddened, apologetic. Raindrop

lashed her tail. Swiftly she turned around and raced into the rain, away, away, away, alone, like she always had been.

Chapter 17.5 - a promise unbroken

Dew peered through the branches, heart racing. He pushed Snow to the side, forcefully shoving her into the shrubs and tussocks. She stared blankly at him. Her whole body shook, white pelt bristling.

"Quiet," he hissed through gritted teeth.

Dew slid behind bracken just as Raindrop breezed past them, fast as the wind. He hoped she was too caught up in her own thoughts to notice their scent. Snow whimpered beside him. Blood coloured her muzzle.

"What did you do?" he growled, knowing he must have pushed her against something sharp.

Snow got to her paws, shrinking beneath his gaze.

"I- I'm sorry," she stammered. Quickly she licked the blood off her pelt. "Thorn. Sorry."

Dew swallowed, letting his heartbeat steady before meowing, "stop pitying yourself and follow me."

Snow nodded, fear reeking off her. Together they stepped out of the canopy gap. Dew opened his mouth, smelling the air. He turned to his side. "She went that way."

He raced off, Snow fearfully yet nimbly following behind him. She said:

"But- but we're supposed to watch the Survivors!"

Dew ignored her. *How you haven't gotten yourself killed yet,* he thought, *is a mystery even to me.*

He slowed as they neared a clearing, taking in the sight. Raindrop

lay on the bank of a river, eyes half-closed, paws shuffling the sand beneath. He almost pitied her. Pitied the cat who wanted to end his life, who wanted to poison him. Pitied the cat who had killed his leader's mate. Pitied the cat whose best friend he had murdered. Hopelessness washed over him.

"You don't tell Ice any of this, alright? Not of the poisoning, not of the herbs. Not a single thing." He hardened his gaze effortlessly, spoke coldly, cruelly.

"But—"

"Are you questioning me?" Dew showed his teeth. "Ice wouldn't hesitate to kill your kit if he knew Fog was alive and well. You were supposed to *kill* him, you know."

Following a soft gasp, Snow yelped, "no! I- I promise, I'll keep quiet."

"Good," Dew growled. "And keep your voice down." *For StarClan's sake.*

...

"Dew!" Cherry ran toward him, fear in her gaze. He quickened his pace, hurried swiftly over the tree-bridge. Cherry gasped, "Blossom. She's sick."

Dew stopped. Dread pierced through him, overwhelmed his every sensible thought. *Sick?*

"Come!" Cherry called again, already turned around. She urged him forward with an impatient flick of her tail. "She's asking for you."

Clumsily he stumbled after her.

Around the two siblings ears pricked in curiosity, intrigue, perhaps even fascination. They were seeing a new, more vulnerable side of their Second in power. Momentarily, Dew was too anxious to care that he was revealing this part of himself.

"Dew," Blossom rasped. Dew half-padded, half-fell into the canopy

hole where his mother lay. She fixed him with a hard glare. Frowned.

"My son," she breathed. Her voice was hoarse, no more than a harsh whisper. She winched then, as if the act of speaking pained her. Dew was glued to the spot. Paralyzed, desperate.

"How are you? Do you need prey? Water? Moss?" Words tumbled out of him.

Blossom sighed, shook her head. Her eyes gleamed with disapproval.

"I see how you treat the others," she began. Coughed. Continued, "and I wonder how I could have birthed such a cruel thing. You're terrible, Dew. A murderer. I'm sure, if Ice ordered it, you'd murder *me.* Your own mother."

"I'm sorry. Can't Luna help you?"

"And *Ice* will order you to kill me. I'm no use to him like this."

"Please. I'm sorry. Stop." Dew looked down. Her words stung like needles, piercing through his heart. "You'll get better. I'll find a way. Luna can help." *I'm sorry. Sorry sorry sorry sorry.*

Blossom sighed. The scent of sickness hung in the air, on her pelt. Scornfully she mewed, "you must. I can't leave Cherry alone with you here."

"I promise." Dew dipped his head, tried to look confident, sure. He felt as if his fears were eating him up. His fear for his mother, fear for what he knew he must do to save her. Most of all, he feared himself. He was a heartless murderer.

Sorry I forgot to update again. Two chapters today to make up for it.

Chapter eighteen - impulses

Raindrop shifted in her nest, rolled over, sighed softly. Whatever she did, sleep would not come. She shivered; the nest felt oddly cold and empty without Ryespring beside her, and the sound of rain falling was no longer around to comfort her.

Then, suddenly, Ivywing's whisper sounded from outside the cave. She spoke, "Poppyglow." Paused. Then, "do you hear that?"

Raindrop pricked her ears. Grass and leaves rustled in the wind. Owls hooted somewhere far above them. Light, almost inaudible steps were nearing camp. *Pawsteps.* In the middle of the night.

"We'll be fine," Poppyglow murmured, though she sounded uncertain for once. Raindrop willed them both to shut up.

She stood up, flicked her tail, then walked toward the edge of the Levelled Rock. There she blinked, fixing her gaze on Ivywing and Poppyglow below her.

A cat emerged from the trees before them. It had terrible hazel eyes, gleaming in the darkness of the night. This must be what her dream had warned her about. Hazel gaze. Death.

"Sorry to disturb your sleep," the cat meowed, dipping his head. He had a very low voice. A tom. "I'd like to propose a deal. Your golden she-cat teaches me herbs, we give you territory. The land is recovering well."

Raindrop tensed. *You are not taking my Honeydusk.*

Poppyglow stepped forward, tail lashing. Ivywing stood completely still, as if she were paralyzed. Then she cried, "*no!* Never! *Leave!*"

Poppyglow glanced at her, surprise visible in her green eyes. Raindrop felt nothing.

"Leave," Ivywing yowled again. "We're not taking your StarClan-

forsaken land! We're just fine here! *Go!*"

Raindrop moved backward, back under the shade of the cave roof. The rogue, once again, dipped his head. He spun around and padded back toward the trees. She thought his tail drooped slightly.

The cats around Raindrop began to stir, woken by the power of Ivywing's shrill voice. Raindrop sat back down in her own nest. Her warmth still lingered there, within the moss and wool and feathers she and her brother had gathered. Together.

Poppyglow jumped up to the Levelled Rock. Ivywing stayed at the ground, looking up. Poppyglow cats a glance back toward her, then sat in front of the group. Swiftly she explained the situation.

...

"You should have negotiated," Goldenthorn growled. Drizzlestar glared at her. She mewed, "perhaps you should sit up all night on guard next time, then. You'd have everything *your way.*" Goldenthorn scowled, looked away.

"It's not easy to think clearly when the cats who killed our entire Clans stroll into our camp like it's nothing." Honeydusk avoided her mother's gaze as she said this. Poppyglow nodded along. For once, she seemed down. Defeated. Raindrop took a deep breath. Surely now, she thought, the group realized the danger they were in?

"The rogues know where our camp is," she stated. "We can't just go on like nothing happened." *Or the gaze will take you all away from me. I know it will.*

"We could speak to them," Leafwillow suggested. "Maybe now that they have the territory they'll listen."

"They won't," Wildfire mewed, shifting her paws. She swayed slightly, as though her own body outweighed her. Her voice was heavy with exhaustion.

Poppyglow said, "we can still try. We have something they need, after all."

Honeydusk stepped forward. Her golden fur looked beautiful even in the night. "That would be terribly dangerous without a backup plan." She spoke in a soft but serious voice, a voice Raindrop wished would speak to *her* again. But that was stupid. This was her fault. Thinking about exhausted she-cats and pretty voices was a waste of time. Being here was a waste of time. Sighing softly, she shook her pelt. There would be no vengeance. They would live beside the rogues. And they would be killed, one by one, because the rogues only know war and bloodshed. Peace was not an option and she was the only one with the brains to realize it.

Lost in her own thoughts, Raindrop missed the rest of the conversation.

Chapter 18.5 - glowing conviction

"Race you!" Poppyglow called over her shoulder. Energy surged beneath her pelt. The dandelion field seemed to stretch on forever and ever, yellow blooms and grass in every direction. It looked as if the sun rested at its unreachable end.

Sharpsight slowed behind her. Poppyglow spun around, hurrying back toward him.

"I won," she said, panting. Sharpsight licked her ear, meowed, "you're exhausting."

"You signed up for it."

"I guess so."

Poppyglow touched her nose to his, purring, not knowing how she had lived without him for most of her life. "I love you." She could never say it enough.

Sharpsight closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The setting sun shone brightly at them. He said, warmly, "I love you too." Then, "we should go back."

The forest loomed in the distance, growing bigger as they neared. Leaves rustled in the wind. Birds flew in between the branches of the trees; it was their home, their territory, as much as it was hers.

"Now you're falling behind."

"Oh." Poppyglow shook her pelt, quickened her pace. "Sorry." Lost in thought again. Stupid.

"You're all good love, you're all good." His eyes twinkled playfully. They both halted. "I'll focus," Poppyglow said, almost defensively. "I just thought of how we share out home with the prey we hunt

without even thinking about it. Oh. I guess I just did."
Sharpsight nuzzled her.

"You're so cute."

Poppyglow glared at him.

"Shut up."

...

Drizzlestar turned her head as Poppyglow and Sharpsight walked into the clearing, eyes widening, as if they had woken her from some kind of trance. From the Levelled Rock she asked, "have you seen Raindrop?"

"No, sorry," Poppyglow replied. Sharpsight dipped his head. Poppyglow looked up, asked, "why? Is she okay?"

"I don't know. I tried talking to her and she just left."

"Don't worry about her." Poppyglow spoke softly, trying to push down the worry welling up inside her. Did Raindrop feel betrayed? They *had* pretty much ignored her idea. Still, she mewed,"she'll come around, eventually."

Drizzlestar sighed. "I'm sorry. Of course she will."

Poppyglow dipped her head.

...

Despite her words, Poppyglow began walking back toward the trees. Orange evening light made the bushes glow, enlightened the camp, the clearing. Beeches and pines embraced her, casting shadows upon her coat.

A small white butterfly moved swiftly before her. Eyes wide, she followed it with her gaze, awed. It disappeared into a blooming bush to her side. As it landed on its branches, three leaves came loose. Two were taken by the wind, carried away. The third fell down at Poppyglow's paws. She brushed it off, gently, with the tip

of her tail.

She sniffed along the ground, hoping for a trace of Raindrop's scent; she felt it was her fault as much as Drizzlestar's, and so she might as well apologize. Try to, at least.

Following what she deemed a relatively fresh trail, she weaved through the shrubs and flowers and grass decorating the ground.

The forest parted, revealing a clearing larger than the one they had made their camp in. There was a river running through its middle, connecting the land to the other side with a fallen tree bridge. Raindrop lay at the bank, staring into the water. As Poppyglow approached her ears pricked up.

Raindrop turned toward her, blinked, spoke no words. Her eyes said, *what do you want? Why are you here? Please leave.*

"Drizzlestar is looking for you," Poppyglow meowed. Raindrop met her gaze. Her amber eyes were dark and dull.

Abruptly a large fox kit emerged from the tall grass. It's eyes were large and afraid, ears flattened. Poppyglow tensed, heart quickening. Fear and pity fought for a place in the racing thing in her chest.

Raindrop stood up in an instant, moving in front of Poppyglow, flexing her claws, baring her teeth. Yet she didn't attack the kit.

Poppyglow swallowed. Her heart ached. What if the fire had taken this fox's kin, just as it had taken hers? And it looked in no shape to inflict the group any harm; its fur was clumpy and torn in places, and its body looked so fragile, so skinny, so tired.

Then its mother appeared before them.

Chapter nineteen - impact

"Fox," Poppyglow panted, out of breath. Desperation tinged her voice. "Please help her."

Pain as sharp as needles poked her bleeding shoulder. Raindrop hissed, angry at the wound, the fox, the pain, everything all at once. Everything hurt. Even her heart ached painfully.

Honeydusk urged her to lay down in a pile of moss and ferns, determined yet gentle. Raindrop avoided her gaze.

"Lay still," Honeydusk whispered, resting her tail on Raindrop's other shoulder. "It's okay. You'll be okay."

Then she turned to her herb storage, reaching toward the cobwebs inside the empty cracks. Raindrop lashed her tail. Her voice felt stuck in her throat. Hoarsely she meowed, "I'm fine. Don't waste herbs on me."

Raindrop winced as Honeydusk's tongue touched her cut. Pain cut into her as if it were spikes, tearing her open from within.

"You're not fine," Honeydusk told her, softly, in between licks. "Just stubborn."

Raindrop looked away.

"What's taking you so long?" Ryespring mewed, clawing at the ground. Poppyglow paced the clearing.

Honeydusk pressed cobweb to the wound, replying, "cleaning her cut and stopping the bleeding. Instead of standing there bothering me, could you go catch something for the fresh-kill pile? And take Poppyglow with you. Thanks."

Raindrop widened her eyes, gasped as Honeydusk pressed down. This Honeydusk was very different yet perfectly the same as the Honeydusk she knew. The Honeydusk she thought must hate her

now. Revenge-thirsty, RiverClan but afraid of water, a waste of herbs, useless and overly emotional, sulky, can't even fight anymore. Survives rogues and loses to a stupid fox.

Ryespring looked as if he were about to object when Leafwillow appeared and whispered something in his ear. He and Poppyglow followed her into the trees. Now only Raindrop and Honeydusk remained in camp.

"Sorry," Raindrop breathed then. "I'm sorry. Don't waste your herbs. Sorry." She felt exposed and vulnerable as Honeydusk tended to her shoulder, as if she couldn't take care of herself, and part of her hated it. She was alone, independent, she had to be.

Another part longed for someone to care for her.

"Raindrop, that's mouse-brained."

Dock leaves. Goldenrod. Poppy seeds. Raindrop pushed the last away. Her shoulder felt better. She didn't need them. Honeydusk pushed them back toward her. Raindrop sighed, muttered a thanks. Swallowed the soothing seeds.

"You know, I'm sorry too. Really. Please—don't stop talking to me again." Honeydusk's voice broke. She took a shaky breath. "I care about you. I just don't think... I don't like causing others pain, even if they're bad. Even if they're rogues. I'm not a warrior."

"I'm... sorry," Raindrop breathed. Louder, "I know. It's fine."

"Thank you." Honeydusk's eyes brightened slightly. Once again she rested her tail on Raindrop's uninjured shoulder. She mewed, "Do you feel pain anywhere else?"

Through half-closed eyes Raindrop glimpsed two shapes emerging from the trees. Ivywing was carrying a scrawny mouse, eyes flicking to and fro as if scared. Wildfire walked behind her without any prey. She looked tired, starved, but also chubby. Strange.

Raindrop thought for a while, though she was beginning to feel dizzy, like her mind was ahead of her. She didn't feel much of anything, really. At last she said, "no."

Honeydusk nodded, sat down, took a deep breath.

"...StarClan came to me, a few nights ago."

Raindrop's ears pricked.

Honeydusk went on, "Dewstar, Spotstar and Ripplestar all spoke to me. They promised to stay by our side, and support whatever we decide to do... with the rogues. So I guess that means they're not done with us yet. But StarClan is with us this time. I'm certain we'll be fine."

Raindrop closed her eyes, feeling relieved and annoyed all at once. Annoyed at herself for being so ignorant, so focused on herself and her feelings, for not being rational. Yet the relief overwhelmed the annoyance. And she felt so tired, so worn-out, like she were drowning, sinking. A pleasant kind of sinking, the water warm and gentle and comforting. Now oblivious to the pain in her shoulder.

"Yes," Raindrop yawned. "We'll be fine." Then sleep claimed her, as if the water had filled her lungs at last.

Chapter twenty - bittersweet tragedy

Raindrop was laying in her new nest by the herb stores, belly growling, falling in and out of troubled sleep, missing the effect of poppy seeds. Two sunrises of breathing, resting, eating, resting, and not being able to walk or run or hunt or fish because of her stupid injury had passed. Soon, Honeydusk told her. Soon.

Meanwhile the threat of the rogues lived, vivid, in her mind.

"Raindrop. Talk to me." Ryespring sat down beside her. Desperation was clear in his voice. Raindrop blinked. Now he knew what she'd felt when Sparkclaw was his centre of attention.

Raindrop swallowed, longed for her clearing, the fields of sweet-smelling flowers, longed for the sound of the river running through it. Remembered the fox, only defending its bewildered kit. Longed for no tensions between the group. No tensions between her and her brother. And so she meowed, "Ryespring."

Ryespring pushed a vole toward her, relief clouding his gaze. Raindrop shook her head. Ryespring said, "eat, please. I need you."

Raindrop took a bite. Then another. Her brother's relief was almost contagious, and she couldn't help but like the feeling of having him look out for her again. She had promised herself she wouldn't lose him, not again, and she nearly had. But it was his fault.

Still, "I need you too." Emotions welled up inside her. Sad and happy all at once. Things were fine. They would be fine. They would live.

"Is your shoulder better?" he asked then. Raindrop shrugged. Her shoulder felt fine, not really affected by the movement. Maybe it stung a tiny bit.

"Maybe."

Ryespring licked her ear, once, twice, like before, like he always did.

"You can't just run from your problems. You have to face them, eventually."

"Says you," replied Raindrop, indifferently. Ryespring's eyes widened.

Again Raindrop thought of her clearing, her river. Honeydusk couldn't keep her in camp forever. She felt better. Some exercise would only do her good.

Without waiting to see if Ryespring would follow, and without casting as much as a glance in Honeydusk's direction, she left her temporary nest and trotted toward the forest. Carefully at first, then breaking into a sprint once sure her shoulder wouldn't bother her. Her brother followed close behind.

"There's... something else, too," mewed Ryespring, panting, once they halted in the clearing. Raindrop tasted the air. Only a faint scent of the fox. It had not returned, thank StarClan. Then she turned to Ryespring.

He said, "Honeydusk," and immediately Raindrop's heart sunk. Whether this happened because of the apparent change in his tone or how his eyes darkened, she did not know.

"Oh." She looked away.

"You're... close," he began, nervously, as if threading on thin ice. Then he paused for a moment, seeming at a loss for words, like always when faced with something he deemed serious.

"She's a she-cat. It's not natural."

"Why does *that* matter now?" Raindrop's tail lashed behind her, swished back and forth in angry motions. She felt suddenly agitated and restless and weary all at once.

"It's *strange.* Two she-cats aren't supposed to be close, not like... not like you and Honeydusk. And she's WindClan."

Raindrop could not stop the memory from slithering into her head. Her, confronting her brother about his relationship with Sparkclaw, telling him she felt hurt, sad that he'd chose a mate that thought his sister as bad as a member of a rival Clan. How he'd raged and leapt and attacked her and then ignored her for moons, time Sparkclaw spent teasing and humiliating and slowly tearing her apart, breaking her, leaving her in pieces.

"I don't care," Raindrop muttered. "Honeydusk's kind to me, she treats others well, I don't care that she's WindClan. I don't care what you think."

She felt betrayed and humiliated and abandoned once again. Yet it was a different kind of betrayal, one that made her want to dig her claws into the earth and yowl to the Stars until her voice was all used up and her throat sore from repeating *not fair not fair not fair not fair not fair*

"Raindrop, please." Ryespring's voice was now sharp as thorns.

Raindrop did not pause to think. She spun around, ignoring the invisible needles poking her shoulder, and ran, away from Ryespring and toward the WindClan she-cat who never lost her patience and who would never, ever attack her, ever.

It was then she realized that she had admitted to Ryespring what she had yet to admit to herself:

She loved Honeydusk.

Bittersweet Tragedy is a song by Melanie Martinez as well as a perfect name for this chapter. And, honestly, it's a really good song, so go check it out.

'One kiss was supposed to be so sweet, but I found grapefruit in your teeth'

Chapter 20.5 - the weight of expectations

"He's mad at you, so he'll want to spend some time alone. Not that I think he should be." Drizzlestar drew her tail along Raindrop's back. "But he'll come to his sense and return. Eventually."

Ivywing flattened her ears, gaze darting back and forth, scanning the clearing.

"What did you..." Honeydusk broke off, eyeing Leafwillow. She was sitting beside Raindrop, just in front of the herb stores. She shook her beautiful head, mewed, "what did you fight about?" So much prettier than Ivywing would ever be.

Raindrop looked toward the trees, avoiding Honeydusk's gaze. "It's not important."

Ivywing breathed in, out. No one had calmed her when her brothers had left. No one had looked for them, no one had cared and still no cat cared. She and her kin were freaks, a waste of space.

If she was the one missing she guessed few would even notice. Wildfire would be glad to lose her. Free. Free of her at last.

"Hey," Wildfire meowed, appearing beside her, not meeting her gaze. Too ashamed to do so.

"Have you eaten?"

Ivywing tried to ignore the hunger gnawing at her belly. "Er, yes." She couldn't eat, she didn't deserve it, the others needed it more. Wildfire and her kits needed it more. If she let herself starve to death at least the group would have one less mouth to feed. And they'd be rid of her.

"You haven't," Wildfire stated. She drew in a long breath, then

walked toward the fresh-kill pile. A scrawny mouse and two tiny birds and a stinky fish. It wasn't right, mixing the Clans' cultures and traditions like this. Not right.

"Eat," Wildfire said, coolly. She left a blackbird in front of Ivywing, then moved toward the Levelled Rock, her big belly weighting her down.

Ivywing stared at the dead bird. Thought, briefly, of the deathberry bush Raindrop had mentioned days prior. The berries of which Raindrop wanted to poison the rogues with. One berry and she would be gone, in StarClan with her freak brothers and perfect Clovetail. At least there she'd be loved. Unwillingly, feeling guilty, she bent down and bit into the bird.

"There's no use searching in the dark. Get some rest, and if he hasn't returned in the morning we'll go out to look for him." Drizzlestar's voice failed to hide her worry.

"It'll be okay," Honeydusk told Raindrop then, in her very honey-like voice. Poppyglow added, "I'm sure he'll come back."

Raindrop muttered an almost inaudible "thank you."

...

"He's not here," Raindrop stated, unnecessarily.

Drizzlestar sighed. Honeydusk, Leafwillow, Poppyglow and Sharpsight gathered around her and Raindrop. Goldenthorn was glaring at them all from the Levelled Rock. Wildfire stayed in the back of the clearing, eyeing Ivywing. Ivywing blinked, looked away.

...

"...and Ivywing and Wildfire, you go in this direction." Drizzlestar flicked her tail, gesturing them toward the hills near the Thunderpath border.

His scent trail led the other way, he was last seen in the clearing, Drizzlestar was only sending them here because she wanted them to feel needed when they all knew they were not.

Ivywing sulked after Wildfire through the grass and heather, again considering the deathberries. She wasn't needed here. She should leave the group alone.

Then an idea crossed her mind, a flash as quick as light passing before her eyes.

The group didn't need her, but someone else very well might.

Chapter twenty-one - sense

Drizzlestar watched as Ivywing and Wildfire were swallowed by the trees. She turned to Raindrop. "Raindrop, you're injured. You're staying here with Honeydusk."

Raindrop stepped forward. "He's my brother."

"And I'm your leader."

Without another word, Drizzlestar spun around and raced after the others. Raindrop breathed in, out, in, out, taking in air in short gasps. In, out, in out. Constantly reminding herself to breathe.

Honeydusk sat beside her, watching the forest. Voice low yet soft, she meowed, "Wildfire is expecting kits."

Raindrop took a step backwards, heart throbbing. What?
"Oh," was all she could say.

"I... I think the father might be the rogue. The one who came here."

Raindrop turned to Honeydusk, meeting her eyes. Dark and perhaps anxious. She mewed, "but that's against the Warrior Code." She realized immediately that this was a dumb thing to say. A Ryespring thing to say.

"Aren't we?" Honeydusk asked, sheathing and unsheathing her claws repeatedly.

"He said we weren't natural," Raindrop replied, before she could stop herself. "That's why I left him. I don't agree." Only speaking when she shouldn't. "I shouldn't have. It's all my fault. I have to find him."

"You left, but he stayed. He could have gone with you. It's not your fault. I promise."

Raindrop felt her muscles relax, against her will. She had to find

him still, because he was her brother and she needed him and he needed her. Breathe. In, out, in, out. She felt Honeydusk move closer, sitting down beside her.

"I love you because you care."

Raindrop's heart skipped a beat. Honeydusk loved her. Impossible.

"I used to think I loved another she-cat, Palecloud. She was cold and careless and sometimes mean, but she was good to me. We were good, for a while. But she wasn't... she wasn't right for me."

Raindrop felt torn. Unbearably anxious and endlessly relieved at the same time. It made no sense. Nothing made sense anymore.

"She wanted me to break all sorts of rules. She wanted me to forget my medicine cat training and become a warrior with her. She even suggested she could teach me to hunt and fight, to turn me into someone I wasn't. We did many things we shouldn't have done, many things I regret now."

Raindrop blinked. Swallowed. She struggled to imagine Honeydusk being bad, being wrong. It didn't fit. Palecloud. Warrior. Wrong.

Honeydusk's voice lightened slightly as she went on, "sometimes I'd steal poppy seeds so we could take them together, for the effect. To relieve our stress for a while. Mostly to feel good. Our mere existence broke all Clan codes combined, I think."

At last their eyes met. Honeydusk purred weakly, nervously.

"The Warrior Code is impossible not to break," Raindrop said, after a moment's hesitation. Honeydusk nodded. Raindrop felt a strange warm sensation rush through her, momentarily numbing her other senses, as though an ocean of pleasure were drowning her. Unable to stop herself, she meowed, "I love you too."

Honeydusk relaxed beside her. "Palecloud was never right for me. You are."

"Maybe... maybe the rogue was right for Wildfire." Raindrop remembered his terrible hazel eyes and respectless way of speech.

What Wildfire saw in him, she had no idea. He was a rogue. A *rogue.* And now she bore his kits. Her huge belly. Her clumsy movements. Of course. It all made sense now.

"Yes," Honeydusk whispered. "Maybe he was."

...

Drizzlestar, Goldenthorn and Leafwillow emerged from the trees, eyes wide and pelts spiked. Dread washed over Raindrop.

"The rogues have captured him. We followed his scent, and it leads straight toward the meeting island, where they've made their camp. At one point his scent intertwined with two others, so, well, it's obvious what has happened. I'm sorry. We will get him back."

Raindrop stumbled to her paws, her shoulder fine, definitely not burning. She left Honeydusk and rushed toward Drizzlestar. "We have to go now." Her voice broke. "*Now*."

Drizzlestar nodded slowly, thoughtful. "We'll need to find the others."

As if on command, Wildfire halted before them, panting. Ivywing was nowhere to be seen. Sharpsight and Poppyglow came moments after, running pelt-to-pelt, inseparable as ever. Raindrop cast Wildfire a glance. "Ivywing won't come," Wildfire meowed, as if in reply.

Raindrop drew in air. Breathe.

"Alright," Drizzlestar meowed. "Follow me. I have a plan."

Chapter twenty-two - beginning ends

As Raindrop ran after the others she thought she glimpsed two starry cats running beside her. Honeydusk's words rang out in her head: "they promised to stay by our side." StarClan was with them. Drizzlestar had a plan. At last this time of foreboding and fear would be over. At last they could move on from the battles and fires and constant dread.

At least, that was what she told herself, whenever unwanted thoughts wormed their way into her mind or when she felt her heart quicken uncomfortably in her chest. StarClan was with them. They would keep Ryespring safe until she could save him.

The meeting island loomed in the distance, very visible as it was green and blooming and contrasting its burned surroundings. Two cats were approaching the tree-bridge, looking quite miserable, their tails drooping and their movements tense. Raindrop could not bring herself to pity them.

Sprinting through past Clan territory felt weird, like they were living in the past, before everything, when the Clans lived separately beside the lake, meeting every full moon and performing Clan rituals...

They were slowing down, trotting, walking, halting. Honeydusk pressed up beside Raindrop, letting her lean on her flank. She whispered, "I promise it'll be okay."

"I know." They were doing the right thing. By running. Not stopping. They had to continue.

"Is your shoulder fine?"

Poking needles. Burning. No. Instead, somewhat awkwardly, Raindrop asked, "will you be fine?"

Honeydusk's tail tip flicked. "Oh, well, I'll... I'll manage."

At this Raindrop felt a tad bit brighter.

Having regained her breath, Drizzlestar sat down before the group. She mewed, "when we're there, I do the talking. No fighting unless the rogues make the first move. Got it?"

Every cat nodded, wide-eyed and alert. Drizzlestar went on, "okay, then let's go," and, as if they were a Clan simply planning to attack another and not a group of survivors moving toward their enemies' camp to rescue one of their own while outnumbered and lacking matching battle skills, they trotted toward the meeting island.

...

"Survivors in camp," a white she-cat stated, though it wasn't very necessary. She stood quite still as the group walked past.

Raindrop halted. Her brother. Right there. A rock wall behind him and three cats hindering his escape. For a heartbeat their eyes met. Ryespring looked away first.

"We knew they'd come," said another.

"Hush, all of you," a third cat meowed. As he stepped forward a tension-filled silence fell over rogues and Clan cats alike.

"Welcome, welcome," he continued, eerily cheerful.

"Ice," Drizzlestar mewed, coolly. "We've reconsidered your offer. Let us return at dawn tomorrow with some herbs and our medicine cat will explain their usage — if you promise to return Ryespring to us unharmed."

Ice's eyes scanned the clearing. "We've found a cat in Twolegplace to heal our wounded. I don't know which offer you're speaking of.

"I'm sorry, but your deputy, your Second, came to us asking for our healing knowledge only a few sunrises ago."

"Lies. Dew never came to you because I never ordered him to." Ice

glanced sideways, a frown now on his face. Dew, a cat Raindrop recognized and hated with all of her heart, shook his head, seemingly attempting to look clueless and cold. Deceitful disloyal liar.

Drizzlestar blinked. "I assure you he did."

"My mother is sick," Dew meowed then, before Ice had time to speak. "I took her to Luna. She couldn't help." He held his chin high as he spoke, avoiding his leader's gaze.

Once again Raindrop saw her mother killed. Killed by this very cat before her. Of course, now that it was *his* mother it mattered. That changed *everything.* Ryespring couldn't stay with these rogues. She had to get him out, willing Drizzlestar to hurry up, for StarClan's sake, for *her* sake.

After a moments hesitation, and the occasional glare at Dew, Ice said, "alright. Return tomorrow. I'll decide then whether I'll release dear *Ryespring* here. We'll treat him well until then. What weird things you call your cats. *Rye-spring*."

No. Raindrop couldn't leave him here. No.

"Our herbs are more valuable than anything this kittypet of yours has to offer. Dew proves that." With this Drizzlestar turned around and began padding toward the tree-bridge, signalling with her tail for the others to follow. Raindrop did not move a muscle.

"I'm staying." She had not found her brother just to leave him. She had to make sure the rogues didn't hurt him. Even if he refused to support her choices he was her brother and she needed him and he needed her, now more than ever, and it was partly her fault he was there and not with the group.

Honeydusk turned her head, meeting Raindrop's gaze, eyes full of concern. Raindrop nodded, thinking, *I have to.* Still no rogue spoke.

The others crossed the tree-bridge without looking back twice. Soon they were out of sight, swallowed by the trees and hills.

"You're very pretty," Ice mewed, circling around her, getting closer,

too close, his fur brushing hers, and in fear she moved to the side, away from this terrible gross disgusting being.

"Take me to Ryespring."

"Our kits would be so beautiful. Come on. Don't you want to be a mother?"

"*Take me to Ryespring.*"

Raindrop felt very very disgusted and very very afraid of this rogue. Her heart throbbed.

"Okay. Fine. Follow me." And so he led her toward the rock wall where her brother sat.

"Get in, both of you." Ice then padded back toward his stump beside dew. The three muscular guards shoved Raindrop and Ryespring into a small den behind the wall.

"You didn't have to," Ryespring muttered, still not meeting her gaze.

"I'm not sorry," Raindrop replied.

Chapter twenty-three - a turn of events

So proud. Condemning. Stubborn.

"You judge too much," Raindrop told her brother, sounding indifferent. She didn't recognize this version of herself, having opinions, voicing those opinions, scolding her own brother.

"You still won't change."

"I don't have to." It hurt, but only a little bit. She didn't have to care what he thought. This was his problem, not hers. Yet she knew him well enough not to expect an apology anytime soon. She added, "what happened?"

"The cat we killed. She was their leader's mate. They took me because they knew you'd come for me. You shouldn't have."

Oh. So it really was their fault.

Ryespring shifted beside her, his body pressing toward hers. Their *den* felt more like a home suitable for a family of mice, and even then it would be small. A small home for some small mice. Something about the thought comforted her.

...

Now that the relief of seeing her brother was wearing off the reality started to sink in. The group would return here, to save him and now her, and by doing so they would put themselves in unnecessary danger. She should have come alone.

She tried to blink the tiredness from her eyes, unbearably stiff from a night of minimal sleep in the enemy's camp. Her bones ached in exhaustion, her belly screamed for food.

The group would come and if a fight broke out they would have no

way of escaping because, surely, the tree-bridge would be guarded, and they were outnumbered *and* their fighting skills were nothing compared to the rogues'.

A head appeared in the den entrance, hissing, "come. They're here." He was a dark brown tom with evil green eyes.

Too afraid to do anything but obey, anticipation weighting every step, Raindrop and Ryespring stumbled out after the rogue.

The meeting island looked as it always had, except that rogues were there in the Clan's place. Ice sat on "his" trunk beside Dew, watching the clearing below. Prey scraps lay rotting all around him, emitting a sour smell. None of the other rogues seemed to have set sitting spots. The group, the Clan cats, the Survivors, stood in the clearing facing Ice.

Honeydusk's eyes widened as she met Raindrop's gaze, melting into those of simultaneous relief and fear. Raindrop's heart dropped. Honeydusk shouldn't be here. None of the group should. Ryespring was her stupid brother, not theirs.

"What've you brought?" Ice seemed to have forgotten his earlier *respectful* act. It was never very convincing anyway.

Drizzlestar dipped her head halfheartedly, eyes gleaming with hatred. Raindrop swallowed. How had she let this happen. She only hoped Drizzlestar's plan was a solid one.

"Forget this," Goldenthorn told Drizzlestar then, stepping forward. "We have Deathly Yew. The Berry of Life.

"Deathly Yew?" Ice flicked his tail, his whiskers quivering.

Goldenthorn nodded, shushing Drizzlestar with her tail. She said, "they're the berries that grant our leaders nine lives. They're deadly if the consumer isn't worthy of their gift." She stared at a light grey she-cat. "You killed me twice. I think that proves it."

At last Ice pricked his ears, seeming interested. He looked at the grey tabby.

"Is this true?"

She nodded, though uncertainty shone in her gaze.

Ice gave his pelt a shake. "Alright. Show me this berry."

Sharpsight emerged from the crowd of Clan cats and dropped a leaf containing one single berry in front of Ice. Ice sat still for quite a while, staring at the berry as though his eyes would make it separate truth from lie. Raindrop, too, stood still, surprised. The deathberries. Everything led to her; this really was all her fault.

Because surely the rogues knew what all Clan cats taught their kits before they were even out of the nursery: *yew berries will kill you. That's why we call them deathberries.* Deathly Yew. The Berry of Life. How, in StarClan's name, had the others thought of this crazy plan?

"Don't Clan cats get their lives from this StarClan they always speak of?" A rogue asked then. Ice's head snapped in his direction.

After a moments hesitation Drizzlestar opened her mouth to speak. "Of course we *say* that," she mewed. Goldenthorn finished, "you think we'd tell our enemies about this willingly?"

"Good point," Ice stated. At last he bent down and sniffed the berry. Now no cat dared to speak.

No cat except Ivywing.

She burst from behind some huge trees, ran toward Ice exclaiming "no!" and, when beside him, pushed the berry away with a single paw.

The cats in the clearing were now too stunned to speak.

"StarClan gives nine lives. They're lying. This is a normal yew berry. It'll kill you."

Chapter twenty-four - the birth of new hope

Wildfire's mouth fell open. Goldenthorn eyes lit with rage. Drizzlestar seemed at a loss for words. Raindrop could only stare and gape. How. Just *how*.

Ice spoke only moments after, as if nothing had changed, but everything had. For the worse. He turned to Raindrop and Ryespring, saying, "you two." Raindrop flattened her ears, feeling Ryespring tense up beside her.

Ice clawed at the ground, drawing three lines in the earth. Three lines, one with a line crossing over it. He went on, "you killed my mate. Now you try to kill me. You and your stupid group of survivors all deserve to die. *Attack*!"

And Raindrop was knocked into by Ice himself. Horror-struck. Blind to everything going on around them.

Ice were claws and growls and hisses and bites, dealing blows with surprising precision.

They rolled on the grass, hearts going off like drums in their chests. Ice dug his claws into her shoulder. Tore open the already existent wound. A lot of blood. Worse needles than ever, poking not only her shoulder but her whole body, boring into her.

She bared her teeth, throwing Ice off her with great effort. Now she stood on three legs and he lay under her, his eyes the coldest shade of blue ever seen.

He lashed for her other leg. She dodged, leaped, and fastened her teeth in his scruff, pressing him down under her. Blood soared in her ears and oozed from her shoulder. Her teeth broke skin. The taste of blood on her tongue. A struggling rogue beneath her. A claw swiping at her belly, unbalancing her.

Ice rolled to the side, smearing the flattened green grass with red blood. He knocked into Raindrop. Her breath was knocked out of her. She fell to the ground. Blind to everything but the excruciating pain rushing through her. This was it. At least she'd meet her sisters again in StarClan. And Shivertail and Reedheart.

Honeydusk, find me in StarClan. I'll wait for you.

Wait. Honeydusk. Raindrop rose to her paws and threw herself at Ice. No. No no no. Honeydusk. She had to save her.

Ice lay on his side, his white belly shining in the sunlight. Raindrop aimed a blow straight at it. Then another. And another and another and another. Ice fell limp with her paw still on his red belly, gleaming in the sunlight. Dead.

Raindrop pricked her ears, eyes scanning the clearing but not really seeing.

Golden coat. Brown coat. Honeydusk swiping wildly. Leafwillow doing everything in her power to protect her sister and defend herself at the same time. Fighting three rogues. One grey, one ginger, one brown. Fear unlike anything Raindrop had ever felt before surged through her.

She limped toward them. Tried her best to ignore the pain. The drum in her chest going off like crazy.

Raindrop leaped at the ginger she-cat from behind, sinking her claws into her skin. The rogue let out a yowl of alarm, snarled, and swiped her claw across Raindrop's face. Blood dripped from somewhere over her nose. Burning. Needles.

Leafwillow was beside her and Honeydusk behind them, forming a sort of protective triangle.

"StarClan help us," Honeydusk whispered, looking up at the sky. Her voice wavered and broke.

Steadily Raindrop forced the ginger she-cat and the brown tom away from their triangle, hissing, biting, dodging and dealing blows almost simultaneously. She'd always been a good fighter. She'd

never enjoyed it one bit.

Then two new cats appeared at her flanks, stars shining in their semi-transparent pelts.

"We're here now," Raindrop's little sister told her. "Come," mewed the other. Raindrop thought she must be seeing things. This was crazy.

Starry leaders and their Clans were fighting the rogues, all forming a line, as of protecting something. Raindrop froze as she spotted that something.

Wildfire. On the ground. Crying out. Bleeding a lot. Giving birth.

Shivertail, Reedheart and the other medicine cats were all floating above her, helpless and desperate. Raindrop turned to Honeydusk, the only plan she could think of in her dazed state. "Wildfire," she breathed. Leafwillow and two StarClan cats drove their attackers from Honeydusk's path, and, without really thinking, blind, again, to everything around her, Raindrop led her to Wildfire.

Survivors and StarClan warriors formed a circle around them as Honeydusk crouched beside the birthing Wildfire. The medicine cats circled above them. Raindrop barely registered what was happening.

More blood. More screams. A rogue inside the circle. A father and a mother witnessing the death of their kit. A father stepping above the rest of the cats in the clearing.

A father growling from the top of his lungs:

"*Stop!*"

The clearing fell silent. Fighting cats broke apart. Wildfire birthed a second kit that was handed to Dew for him to lick. To warm up. But his body was already cold and limp and covered in his mother's blood.

"Push," Honeydusk told Wildfire, in a gentle, if not the gentlest and kindest voice Raindrop had ever heard. Full of care. Full of pity.

"Come on. Push. One left. You can do this."

A yowl. Multiple groans. More blood. One last kit.

Raindrop licked the she-kit's fur the wrong way, warming her small and bloody body. She could feel a drum like her own inside her chest, though weak, fading away. She couldn't let it.

Live, she told the kit, or at least she thought she did. *Live for your mother. For Honeydusk. For me. Please. Please please please live.*

The heartbeat grew steadier. The kit mewled.

Another cat entered the circle. A liar. A traitor. Ivywing sat beside Wildfire and her dead sons. Honeydusk stood up, taking three steps backwards, away from them both.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. Wildfire's spirit rose from her body and was embraced by StarClan above, clutching her kits to her belly, watching the third with a saddened gaze.

"Sparkkit, I'll wait for you," her voice said, echoey and strange, as if it were a breeze, unreachable, carrying her emotions like scents of grief and apologies and guilt.

"She needs milk," Honeydusk said to Dew, her voice still kind and sweet and sympathetic and quiet. Grief-stricken. Dew responded with "Crow!", and a black she-cat entered the circle, cautious, unwanted.

Raindrop pressed the she-kit - Sparkkit - toward the rogue queen, somewhat unwillingly. Sparkkit mewled again. Crow guided her toward her belly.

"Go on," she told the terrified kit. "It's okay. I don't bite."

...

A moon later nine survivors left the meeting island, left the past behind, and felt ready to embrace the future that lay ahead of them.

...It was the end of one story, but the beginning of another.

Epilogue - results of changes

Two groups of wild cats, both living in fear. The land around them reduced to ash, permanently marked by nature's greed. Burnt. Abandoned. But never forgotten.

One group climbs the mountain, another crumbles beneath its towering shape. Both fear and both struggle.

One, however broken, is feared by the other as well as itself. Yet the other refuses to leave it in ruins.

A cat is killed. Another rises in his place.

A cat dies. Another lives to preserve her legacy.

...

A connection is formed.

*

"Stay with your mother, okay?" Goldenthorn told a brown kit. Questions swam in the depths of his blue eyes. His sister replied for him: "why wouldn't we?" Then, following an excited jump, she squealed, "we'll be WildClan warriors! Ooh, what do you think my warrior name will be?"

"You'll be a great warrior one day," Goldenthorn purred. "And I'm sure your name will be great, whatever it is."

Her brother nodded, calmly and seriously, his eyes so like his mothers. Goldenthorn licked his head and added, "and yours will too."

The kits jumped, synchronized, as their father and his sister walked through the camp entrance. They left their grandmother without as much as a whisper of farewell. Another purr escaped her.

Ryespring and Raindrop carried the kits on their backs, all the way toward the Rock Cave. From the Levelled Rock Leafwillow looked down at them, happiness flooding her gaze.

"I bet you can't get up here on your own," she teased. The kits leaped and threw themselves at her.

"Please don't kill my mentor," Sparkpaw pleaded. Her voice was light and cheerful.

"Don't worry," the tom-kit promised. He turned to his sister. "I'll make sure she doesn't."

"Hey!"

Goldenthorn felt happier than she had in moons.

*

From the ashes of the past new hope arises.

WildClan and SparkClan are formed.

And for the first time a future awaits them both.